

Deirdre O'Dare



*Burrito Belle's
Gringo Guy*

BURRITO BELLE'S GRINGO GUY

...Juan seemed to be calmer and more in control of the moment than Troy was. As if from a distance, Troy watched the other man stand, come around the table and stop at Troy's side. Juan hesitated a moment before he put one hand on Troy's shoulder. The touch was light, but Troy felt it in every nerve. Awareness and arousal washed over him in a breath. His cock leaped to attention, straining at the confines of his slacks and Jockeys.

He heard the slight hitch in Juan's breath and when he looked, he saw the smaller man had a hard-on, too. *Whoa. What the fuck? Where do we go next?* Moving as if swimming in molasses, Troy stood. He felt Juan's hand slide free to fall aside as he reached out with both arms. Juan flowed into Troy's embrace and clasped both of his arms around his body, just above his waist.

Juan was about five-ten, Troy decided, as their bodies fit together. Though slender, the Latino was wiry and tough, muscles honed by activity and lean, perhaps from not always having enough food. Juan had not confided a lot of details to Troy, but he'd gathered enough to verify the other's life had not been easy nor had he yet climbed the ladder of success as far as Troy had, although it was clear that was coming.

Troy recognized that Juan had the determination and drive to succeed, just as he had.

We could make a good team if we worked together. I'm not sure how yet but...

There was still the issue of the Mexican drug gang to deal with, but for now, that was far from the most urgent matter.

The most urgent matter was right here in his arms, stretching up until their mouths met and melded...

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You Were Always On My Mind

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BY

DEIRDRE O'DARE

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.AmberQuill.com>

BURRITO BELLE'S GRINGO GUY
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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ISBN 978-1-60272-571-3
Cover Art © 2009 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: Elemental Alchemy

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*This one is first for Susan and her amazing Chihuahua crew
and then for friends in New Mexico who reminded me
I needed to set some tales in their wonderful state where I made
a brief home and to which I intend to return in time.*

*My eternal gratitude to the great folks at Amber Quill who never
cease to amaze me with the way they can be totally
professional and businesslike and still an extended family with
arms open to take in more of us and make us feel
at home. You are all truly awesome and I love ya a bunch!*

PROLOGUE

Cuidad El Paso, USA

Late spring

4:30 a.m.

Juan Pablo Garcia y Calderon crept along the dark alley. He moved as quietly as his feline counterparts who haunted the place. They slipped off ahead and aside, silent as shadows, granting a fellow traveler passage. If the saints and Mother Mary were kind, he'd evade those who pursued him. Approaching dawn tinged the eastern horizon with the faintest hint of color, but in El Paso's bleakest *barrio*, the only colors were shades of gray.

A slight sound halted his progress. A whimper, a whine, the merest whisper of distress? *Where? What?* He stopped to listen

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with total concentration. Again, there, just to his left. *Close*. He stooped to reach with a careful hand, mindful of hidden dangers. Rags, tattered papers and trash were all his questing fingers found. Then... *Wait*... softness and a trace of warmth. He groped deeper in the litter, finding a small body, merely thinly furred skin stretched over fragile bones, but it stirred and gave off a trace of living heat.

The creature did not resist when he scooped it up. The fading darkness and his night-tuned vision let him discern the color—pale tan—and the shape, head too big for the small body with stick-like legs and large ears. A Chihuahua puppy by the looks of it. He tucked the shivering little shape into his sweatshirt and cradled it there with one hand as he pressed on, moving faster now under the spur of urgency. He needed to be far from here before sunrise.

No time to dawdle now. Albuquerque and the relative safety of Tio Tomás's home were still far away. Juan broke into a trot, trying to steady the small dog against his body. He still scanned the area around him as he loped along, alert for hazards and danger, but eager to leave the ugly reality of the border city as far behind him as he could. He'd made it this far, and with luck, he'd never return to Ciudad Juarez and its war-torn streets again. His brief time there had almost cost him his life. He'd learned it had taken his brother's. Pedro had been working for the Federales undercover and someone had caught onto him—that was the only thing Juan could figure.

The puppy didn't move as they headed toward safety. At the moment, he was not even sure of the gender of the pup he'd found but its shivering had stopped. Still he could feel the slight flutter of breath and heartbeat and knew the little dog was alive. Saving it became almost as critical a need as saving himself. They were two of a kind—throw-away refugees, devalued by the unforgiving

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society that had made them outcasts and judged their lives of no worth. Juan was tough. If the pup were equally so, they would make it.

Sunrise found him in the northwest quadrant of the city, moving along the Rio Grande, between it and the humming busyness of Interstate 25. Following those two arteries would lead him eventually to Albuquerque. It was a long way to walk, but he'd already come a longer way. A few more kilometers, even many, were not too far to go for safety and a chance at tomorrow.

CHAPTER 1

*Ten months later
Albuquerque, NM*

Troy Cantrell stepped through the revolving door of the new high-rise AmBank Building into the sun-washed rush of midday. Maybe a walk would clear his head. It held a tangle of demands and issues that had become the norm in his job as a financial advisor in these troubled times. Clients were much choosier and more suspicious than they had been mere months ago. They asked tough questions and challenged traditional notions he'd learned in college while earning his MBA. Times really were a changin' and a person had to change along with them, but it was not often easy and it was always stressful.

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He turned down Lomas Boulevard and stepped out briskly, dodging among others hurrying one way or strolling along the other, his goal the small park a few blocks away where he could find relative quiet and maybe catch a bit of calming sunshine and peace for a few minutes before he returned to work.

A streak of tan came shooting toward him, zigzagging among legs and bicycles. *What the hell?* As it got close, he recognized the scampering scrap of fur as a small dog, probably a Chihuahua. Incredibly, the creature came straight to him, slowing its headlong flight right at his feet. There it sat, looking up at him with unblinking bright eyes, a twitching, inquisitive black nose and chocolate-edged ears cocked like antennas.

As he reached down to scoop up the little critter before it came to harm in the flurry of traffic and pedestrians, a slender dark young man burst through the crowd and skidded to a stop when his gaze fell on the dog, cradled now in Troy's left arm.

"Ah, mi mal perro! Why do you run, chiquita? It is of great danger! You are too little to..."

The man's broken tirade stuttered to a stop as he tipped his head back to look up to Troy's six-foot-four-inch height. *"Me siento.* I apologize for *mi perrito*, my little dog. She is a bad one sometimes. She mostly stay right by me, but today she goes flying away all at once! *Gracias*—thank you—for catching her."

He reached out to relieve Troy of the burden. Troy felt an inexplicable surge of reluctance to relinquish the little animal. Its weight was slight, but felt comfortable and warm resting in the crook of his arm.

"This little mutt's yours? What's her name? Don't you think maybe you should keep her on a leash or something?" He didn't need to check to feel sure the dog was female; everything about her

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simply shrieked femininity, from her dainty feet to the smooth, rounded head with its delicate features.

"She was wearing a new collar I got for her, but I think I put it on too loose. She wiggled out while I was dealing with some customers and took off like a bullet. I was very afraid my little friend would be lost or made dead!" The younger man's face was full of distress. "I do my best to take good care of her. She is *mi amiga especial*, my special friend. We have shared many adventures."

Troy eased his hold on the dog, but kept a hand ready to capture her again until she was secure in her master's grip. "You mentioned customers. Do you work in a store or an office?"

"I have a taco cart." The young man squared his shoulders as he made the statement, pride in his tone and posture. "Already I have paid back my uncle of the *dinero* he give to me to buy it and I put more in the bank now every week. In time, I will have my own restaurant, but for now, it's a good business. Do you maybe want to have lunch? This time it will be for free, since you saved Burrito Belle for me. It is just down the block, across from the park."

Something in the other man's demeanor touched a nerve in Troy. He, too, was a self-made man, and the struggles he'd endured as he clawed his way through college and into a good job were still fresh in his mind. "Why not? I need to eat somewhere and I happen to like tacos. Lead on."

"*Mi nombre es Juan*. The name of my stand is *Burrito Belle's Comidero*. Come and I will fix you *un taco especial*."

"I'm Troy. I work in the AmBank building." Troy extended his hand. Juan's grip was surprisingly strong. He was not a large man and appeared quite young, but he had a dignity and strength of character Troy had to admire.

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As simply as that, a friendship began. Within a few days, it became Troy's habit to stop by Juan's stand almost every day when he went out for his midday walk. Clearly, Burrito Belle thought he was a great guy, even if he had stopped her runaway adventure. Maybe she'd even intended for that to happen. Who could say? When she cocked her head and looked up, her black diamond eyes alight with mischief and meaning, it was easy to believe she understood a lot more than an average dog ever could.

Troy had never cared for small dogs. He'd harbored the opinion that to be a real dog, a critter had to weigh close to forty pounds minimum, be able to devour about a quarter of a beef at one setting and do something useful like terrorize the nosy neighbors or keep salesmen away from the door. Chihuahuas had barely existed in his world, probably only ensconced in the designer bag of a blonde starlet look-alike or a clone of the current Latina diva.

But Burrito Belle had plowed right through his prejudices the first moment he met her. She stole his heart as deftly as a street urchin in Juarez could heist a pack of gum or a candy bar. She was just too damn cute. Juan didn't seem to mind that his fur-girl had a new hero in the person of Troy. If anything, he encouraged it with sly comments in rapid-fire border Spanish and tidbits slipped to Troy to pass to her.

The diminutive dog was popular with most of the customers and somehow the health inspectors never seemed to object to her being there where Juan served food. Usually, she perched atop a folding stool near the ornate old cash register and regarded the activity swirling around with keen attention. If anyone was so incautious as to reach too close to the money drawer, she gave a sharp, warning yap, and the offender jerked back quickly. Those

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teeth were small but needle sharp and she showed them with a lifted lip when she barked in that particular tone. The rest of the time she kept her nose well away from the covered trays of meat and salsa, the alcohol-lamp warmed tortilla shells and the rest of the ingredients.

Although he learned a little bit of Juan's background from their casual chats at lunch, Troy found himself wanting to know more about the ambitious and serious young man. He sensed there were things in Juan's past he would never share with anyone he did not trust completely. Troy realized he wanted to be one of those trusted friends. He even sensed Juan might have a similar desire, but how could he be sure? The questions needed to find out could create a risk he wasn't ready to take.

Troy told himself it had nothing to do with a physical attraction—he'd moved away from that sort of thing when he left college and the professor with whom he'd shared a brief but steamy fling. Relationships tended to expose you to too much pain, too many wasted hours. He didn't need any more of either.

Such hours were better spent figuring how to get ahead and build the secure financial foundation necessary to ensure you'd never be broke and helpless again. He was not going to go there again, not even in memories. That part of his life was over and done for good. He'd only focus on relationships after he assured his security. That's what he kept telling himself, but he looked forward a little bit more each day to heading out around noon and stopping at *Burrito Belle's Comidero*.

Raised in an Arizona mining town, he'd grown up with Mexican food, even if his parents were from the coal-mining region of Appalachia. They'd fled a strike and unsafe working conditions at home only to arrive in time for one of the worst

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strikes in the hard rock mining history of the Arizona copper camps. The family never regained the minimal security they'd lost. As the eldest son, Troy had left home as soon as he could, sending back a little money when he was able. He soon recognized an education was the only route out of grinding poverty. He pursued that goal with fierce determination until he won it.

Now his dad was gone and two of his siblings had disappeared, but he supported his mother in relative comfort and made sure the two youngest kids got through college easier than he had. That took about all the free money, time and energy he had. So what was he doing, thinking of taking a young Latino under his wing? It would be stupid.

All of this ran through his mind for the twentieth time as he dodged his way down the street to the taco stand. Impatience tightened his whole body as he tried to force his way through a thickening crowd that seemed to knot around the corner where Juan's stand was parked.

What's going on? Why are all these people standing right here?

It took some linebacker moves, gentled but a little for the time and place, to get him through to the front edge of the crowd. Two men stood at the side of the cart, two whose appearance and demeanor kept the crowd back at more than an arm's length. The gathered group fidgeted and whispered, but no one was about to step forward and get into the confrontation.

The bigger man had Juan by one shoulder, his talon-like fingers clenched in a punishing grip. The other man, nattily dressed in an expensive suit, Italian leather loafers and a snap-brimmed gray hat spat orders in sibilant Spanish. The big man, wearing a T-shirt and greasy jeans, seemed to obey the commands with relish.

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It took Troy only an instant to assess the situation. Some inner sense told him Juan's past had arrived with a vengeance. He knew about the Mexican drug lords and the gang warfare that was spilling across the border to a number of cities, not just to El Paso and San Diego, but Tucson, Phoenix and Albuquerque. He'd be damned if he was going to let his friend be victimized by these hoods.

Surging past the crowd, he grabbed the smaller man by one arm and spun him around. "What the hell do you think you're doing? You can't strong-arm people here. Get back across the line where you belong."

The smaller man grabbed for his waist, but Troy clamped down on that arm with his other hand. "No, you don't, *cabron*. Call off your pit bull and I might not hurt you real bad."

He risked a quick glance at some of the people in the forefront of the crowd. "Somebody call the cops. We don't need these guys causing trouble here. I'd bet there's something they can be charged with."

One woman fumbled a cell phone out of her purse and started dialing as Troy turned his attention back to the two. At the boss's orders, the big man released his hold on Juan and stepped back. Juan staggered a couple of steps to lean against the nearest end of his stand. Burrito Belle popped up from under the counter and pressed her small body close against him.

Within moments a police cruiser appeared. Two uniformed officers got out and approached. At that, the smaller of the two thugs looked anxious in spite of his efforts to appear cool and in control. He tried to bluster, first in Spanish, which the officers ignored, and then in heavily accented English. He babbled about rights and complained Troy had manhandled him, but the cops

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were not buying it. They patted him down, found the snub-nosed semi-automatic pistol at his back and another in an ankle holster. He did not have concealed carry permits for either one, so it was enough to take him in. There was a warrant out for the bigger man, which gave them reason to pick him up as well.

The excited crowd soon dispersed, leaving a few regular customers waiting for their lunch and Troy, not sure what to do now that the immediate danger was past.

He looked Juan over with a keen eye. The younger man was a bit pale, but did not seem to be injured. "Are you okay? Did that big bruiser hurt you?"

"No. *Estoy bien*...I am not hurt. It's all right." Juan stepped through the narrow gate into the cart's open center and turned to the waiting customers. "Who's first? I am sorry for the delay. Lunch is on the house today as they say."

Most of the customers insisted on paying despite Juan's offer. They could see the situation was not his fault and agreed he should not suffer any losses because of it. Many seemed a little abashed they had not dared take action as Troy had, but then most of them were not six-four with an athlete's physique. Troy waited until Juan had served the others, and the lunch rush eased. Then he stepped up to the counter.

He managed a quick scratch for Burrito Belle, but his attention focused on Juan. "Want to talk about it? I get the feeling you know those guys or at least who they are and you weren't happy to see them."

The wry grin spoke for Juan before he finally shrugged, as if having reached a decision. "*Ah, si*, I know them. They came up from Juarez. I'm not sure how they found me, but *no le hace*. I knew in time they would." He turned his attention to preparing

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Troy's customary two tacos just the way he liked them. "It is not your problem, my friend. Maybe the law will keep them busy for a little while now and out of my way."

Juan spoke without looking up, his face held in rigid composure. The mask did not fool Troy for a moment. He could sense the other man was worried and fearful. *Well, if a couple of hoodlums were after me, I'd be worried, too.* Then he realized his intervention had made that very thing possible if not likely. *Oh, shit. Well, it's too late to change things and I don't think I would anyway.*

The vague answer Juan had given did not satisfy Troy's concerns. Anxiety for his friend overrode the voice of caution and the old habits of keeping his distance. He reached across and settled his hand atop Juan's, stilling the smaller man's hectic motions. This time Juan did look up.

Troy fell into a bottomless pool of dark fire.

CHAPTER 2

Troy froze as a series of powerful emotions swept over him like a tsunami. When had this smaller, younger man come to be so important that a vision of Juan hurt or killed almost tore his guts out? When had what he'd considered a casual friendship become something else, a great deal more intense and overpowering? *Why? When? How?*

He tightened his hand atop Juan's and then released it. Juan shook his head. Amazement changed swiftly to sorrow in his expression before he spoke.

"No! Why did you get involved? These are very bad men, my friend. Now they will learn who you are and where you live, who you care about and you will be in their power, too. You should not have stepped in."

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“Bullshit! This is America, Juan, not Mexico. I know they must be part of the drug empire, but they don’t have the same kind of clout here. They’d better haul ass for home as soon as the cops get through with them. I’m not afraid of their likes.”

Again, Juan shook his head. “You should be. I tell you they are bad men with great power. Their power extends even here, in the *Estados Unidos*. You are not safe just because you are not in their country. They have connections and friends in places you cannot imagine. I know what I am speaking about.”

Troy fought down his irritation. He didn’t want to believe evil such as he had felt from especially the smaller and better dressed of the two hoodlums could touch him or anyone he cared about. Although he sensed a thread of truth in Juan’s pained words, he denied it. *Damned if I’m going to roll over and play dead.*

“I’m not afraid,” he repeated. “Tonight, you’re going to come home with me. I live in a complex with good security. Just anyone can’t get in.”

Juan twisted his hands together. “No. That would not be right. I will go home to my uncle’s as usual.”

“Do you want to put your uncle and his family at risk? That’s stupid! Some of those hoods will be watching. You know there weren’t just the two. If you go with me, they’ll know you aren’t at his place. They won’t need to threaten him or his family.”

New distress flared in Juan’s expressive face. He clearly had not fully realized others might be at hazard. “No, I will go instead to the YMCA or to the church for tonight. Even these *cabrones malos* would not go there. At least I do not think they would.”

Troy decided he’d appear to capitulate. “Okay. Let me have my tacos then. I need to get back to my office. My lunch hour is nearly over.”

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Juan busied himself at the task, but Troy saw the other man's hands were not steady as he tucked meat, cheese and lettuce into the folded tortillas. Juan was trying to put a good face on things, but he was clearly very scared.

"I know them," he said, almost as if he was talking to himself. "I traveled to Juarez to find my brother many months ago. He was already dead, and I refused to take his place as a runner for the cartel. I ran from them, crossed the border, and came to Albuquerque. I didn't think they'd try to find me, even that they'd want to. I don't know their secrets and no one has big money to pay ransom for me. Why? *¿Madre de Díos, porque?*"

Troy bit back the arguments he wanted to make as he took the tacos. About three-thirty, he'd simply come back. He'd watched from his tenth-floor office window often enough to know Juan's routine. The vender would close up his cart shortly after three and wheel it down to the smaller building across from the AmBank tower where another relative ran a restaurant. He stashed the cart in their storage room at night. By the time he got there, Troy would be there, too.

He wouldn't tell Juan, not just yet. He'd simply show up and refuse to accept any of the other man's arguments. All he was sure of was that he had to keep Juan safe, whatever it took.

* * *

Troy ended his work for the day and slipped out of his office at three-fifteen. At this hour, the sidewalks were not crowded. He strode at a brisk pace to the end of the block and crossed to the opposite corner. At the far end of that block, he glimpsed Juan, wheeling his cart toward the alley behind the El Capitan Café. Burrito Belle perched on the little shelf inside the pushcart's chrome handles, taking in the sights as she always did.

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Troy chuckled. The crazy little dog was something else. He'd thought himself too busy and perhaps to self-sufficient to have a pet, but the idea was growing on him. Someone to talk to, a warm little body to snuggle close those times you were alone and maybe feeling just a bit behind the power curve when life nearly got the best of you. The comfort of a pet could be a good thing...

He moved quickly to the end of the alley Juan had entered and hurried down its length. He reached the back door of the restaurant just as Juan emerged, now carrying Burrito Belle as he fumbled in a pocket for the change for bus fare out to the northwest part of town where his uncle lived. His expressive face reflected the parade of emotions caused by the day's events.

A keen pang of empathy plunged through Troy. Being worried, fearful, and threatened were not strangers to him, although he had left a lot of that behind. Still, he knew his current security and comfort could vanish overnight as it already had for many in the current troubled financial climate.

It seemed very unfair when Juan had struggled so hard to build himself a new life to have it challenged by scumbags who preyed on the weak to obtain all their gain and power.

At that moment, Juan sensed someone nearby. His head whipped around. Relief swept over his face as he recognized Troy only to have distress quickly replace it. "What are you doing here? It is not yet time for you to leave your work! Why are you here?"

Troy grinned. "To collect you, buddy. I didn't insist at lunch, but I'd already made up my mind. You really can't go to your uncle's tonight and you need a place to stay, you and Burrito Belle. I have an apartment in a secure complex with guards at two gates. That's about the safest place I can think of. If some of those thugs are watching, at least they'll know you aren't at your uncle's. They

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may not figure out right away just where we're going."

When Juan hesitated, Troy reached out and caught his arm. "Come on. No arguments. I have plenty of room and I've got to admit it gets too damn quiet sometimes. It won't be any trouble, so just shut up and come along." He smiled to take the harshness out of his words. For a moment, he thought Juan might still resist, but the other man seemed to think the better of that and to recognize the sensible purpose of Troy's offer.

"Ah, sí. Okay, I'll come, but only for a night or two, no more than that. Let me call my uncle and just tell him I am going to stay with a friend tonight. I do not want him to worry. He is almost like a father to me—my mother's big brother, a good man and a kind one."

Troy released his hold on Juan's arm and slowed his pace while the other man pulled out his cell phone and made the call. Then they walked back to the lot where Troy parked his car, a four-year-old SUV he'd bought the first year he began working for his current employer. Despite how accustomed he was to being alone, it felt good to have Juan with him, Juan and that goofy dog. She perched on the armrest between them, studying Troy with beady, bright eyes. He could have sworn she winked at him.

* * *

Juan skidded to a halt when Troy opened the door to his apartment and stepped back to gesture Juan inside. His grip on Burrito Belle tightened until she made a small whine of protest.

"*Santa Madre*, this is *un palacio*! You live here all by yourself? Do you not roll around like *un frijole solo en un gran olla*? I knew you were not poor, but this is—it is like a home for a king, *un*

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hombre mas rico,”

Troy tried to see his familiar residence through the young Latino's eyes. Well, it was a far cry from the homes he'd grown up in—a log-and-tin shack in the “holler” in West Virginia or the small stucco company house in Morenci, Arizona. He could probably fit both of those residences into this condo with room to spare.

The complex was one of several in the lower foothills of the Sandias, overlooking the city spread out below. The only way up to the area was a gated road. A second gate with a security combination lock guarded the central courtyard onto which all the entrances opened and kept strangers out of this set of condominiums.

His unit sat on the second floor so the picture window in the great room looked out over the Rio Grande Valley. Now, as the early spring sun sank toward the western horizon, the view looked like a colorful painting, streaks of cloud tinted with a palette of red, gold and coral above the dark blue-gray ridge of the distant mountains forming the bottom border.

Still cradling his dog in one hand, Juan edged toward the window and looked out, taking in the spectacular view. Shadowed now, Albuquerque sprawled below, lights beginning to wink on as darkness fell. He shook his head, as if to clear away his obvious amazement.

“This is too much, too grand. I knew you were not of my class, but why would someone who can afford this place take time for one like me? I do not understand. Yes, we are friends downtown, but people who live in places like these do not invite people like me—we work for your kind, not socialize together.”

“I didn't always live in luxury,” Troy began, feeling a need to

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explain and try to put the other man at ease. "I grew up in squalor, conditions as bad as any *barrio*. My father worked as a miner, barely eking out a living for us six kids. We only had two bedrooms most of the time—Mom and Dad had one and we kids had the other with a curtain between the girls' bunks and the boys'. I swore I'd never live that way again. God willing, I won't, but I don't mind sharing what I've been lucky enough to get. You and Burrito Belle are welcome wherever I happen to live. Right now it's here."

Juan still hesitated. Burrito Belle squirmed, clearly seeing no reason for him to hang onto her so hard.

"Put the dog down. She wants to explore and there's nothing she can hurt. I know she's a lady and will behave herself."

Still Juan hesitated. Finally, he stooped and let his dog jump down. She made no sound when she hit the carpet, sinking half the length of her small legs into the pile. She pranced across the room toward the arched doorway into the kitchen, lifting each leg with exaggerated care. At the doorway, she stopped and looked back at them. Both men had to laugh and that broke the worst of the tension. With a flirt of her tail, she stepped onto the tile floor of the kitchen and disappeared around the corner.

"I would be honored to fix your dinner," Juan said as the two of them followed Burrito Belle into the ultra-modern kitchen. "What would you like? Tacos are not the only thing I can fix." He grinned, clearly reclaiming a bit of his equilibrium and humor. "My mother cooked for a well-to-do family in Guadalajara and she taught me how to prepare many dishes. That's why I want to have a restaurant someday."

Troy shrugged. "We might have to make a run down to the market then. I don't keep a lot of stuff here—frozen dinners in the

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fridge and some beer and stuff. Cooking is not my strong suit, although I can grill steaks and do a few basic things in a pinch. Mom didn't think boys belonged in her kitchen except to eat."

Juan shook his head. "That is bad. Men have to eat, too, and they do not always have a woman or a restaurant nearby."

They did end up driving to the shopping complex at the foot of the hill, just outside the gated entrance. Juan shopped with canny skill, Troy noticed, and seemed to know exactly what he needed and the best value in each item. He did it quickly as well. In less than a half-hour they headed back up the hill to home. By the time darkness set in, Juan was ready to put his creations on the table and sit down to eat.

Yep, he could definitely do more than fix tacos. Troy had paid good money for many worse meals in expensive restaurants.

"Oh, man, that was great. I think I'll marry you." Troy's unthinking comment slipped out before he could censor it. He realized what he'd said when Juan's startled expression soaked in.

"I— That is not yet legal in New Mexico, is it? And you do not have to go that far." Juan spoke very low and much more slowly than usual. In less than an instant his gaze slid from Troy's face to the floor and fixed there, riveted to the pattern of the tiles.

Troy felt his face heat, embarrassment flooding through him. Juan had not indicated he was gay nor had he shown many signs of an attraction to Troy. *We're friends, buds, nothing more. Are we? Holy shit, what did I just say? Some Freudian slip that was!*

Panic fisted around his heart. *No relationship, not yet, maybe not for a long time. And with Juan? No! I admire the hell out of this guy. I really like him. But... Oh, my God, maybe I do want to take it farther. Is that why I asked him to come and stay? A real reason under the altruistic one of keeping him out of reach of those*

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gangsters?

A welter of emotions, all verging on something approaching complete terror, flashed through him. "I...er...I didn't mean it that way. I mean, well, I don't know if you— What kind of social life you have or want, whether it's girls or guys or both or neither or..." He floundered into silence.

Shit! He hadn't been so uncertain in years, since the time a teammate his first year at college had made a pass at him, and not one with a football. He wasn't usually a gauche asshole like this. *What's going on?*

"It's okay. I did not think you are one of the *muchachos mariposos*, but I am not offended. I tell you I would not run away if you meant it. We are friends already, maybe could become more. I know that's not why you asked me to stay. I would have refused. I do not sell myself so cheap or out of fear." Juan's growing facility with English seemed to have abandoned him at the moment. His words emerged stilted and awkward, slowly, as if he were searching for the right ones.

Still Juan seemed to be calmer and more in control of the moment than Troy was. As if from a distance, Troy watched the other man stand, come around the table and stop at Troy's side. Juan hesitated a moment before he put one hand on Troy's shoulder. The touch was light, but Troy felt it in every nerve. Awareness and arousal washed over him in a breath. His cock leaped to attention, straining at the confines of his slacks and Jockeys.

He heard the slight hitch in Juan's breath and when he looked, he saw the smaller man had a hard-on, too. *Whoa. What the fuck? Where do we go next?* Moving as if swimming in molasses, Troy stood. He felt Juan's hand slide free to fall aside as he reached out

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with both arms. Juan flowed into Troy's embrace and clasped both of his arms around Troy's body, just above his waist.

Juan was about five-ten, Troy decided, as their bodies fit together. Though slender, the Latino was wiry and tough, muscles honed by activity and lean, perhaps from not always having enough food. Juan had not confided a lot of details to Troy, but he'd gathered enough to verify the other's life had not been easy nor had he yet climbed the ladder of success as far as Troy had, although it was clear that was coming.

Troy recognized that Juan had the determination and drive to succeed, just as he had.

We could make a good team if we worked together. I'm not sure how yet but...

There was still the issue of the Mexican drug gang to deal with, but for now, that was far from the most urgent matter.

The most urgent matter was right here in his arms, stretching up until their mouths met and melded.

CHAPTER 3

Juan's lips tasted of subtle flavors and spices like the meal he'd prepared for them, of the coffee they had drunk after dinner, plus a unique flavor all his own. Troy lapped at them greedily, compelled by a sudden urgency to absorb all he could. The texture and taste, the blaze of sensations flooding through him as their tongues danced, the eager press of Juan's body against his awoke every nerve in his whole being. He'd never felt more alive, more aware.

The kiss—or make that kisses—went on and on. Troy knew he didn't want to end it and it felt like Juan didn't either. What was so intoxicating about lip-locking with this guy, someone he really hadn't known that long and certainly did not know that well? His head was buzzing too much for coherent thought and other parts were right in there as well. He dropped one hand and found

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himself clutching one cheek of Juan's ass, feeling the muscle flex and bunch beneath his fingers. They were both ironwood hard, cocks nudging and straining for freedom. Troy's khaki slacks gave him a little more space than Juan's tight jeans, but in both cases, it was not nearly enough.

Troy's other greedy hand had begun to tug at Juan's *Tecate* logo T-shirt, dragging it out of his jeans so he could find the smooth hot skin beneath it. *Yeah. Good, so good.* His questing fingers absorbed heat, satin smooth skin taut across a respectable six-pack of abs, a slender arrow of dark hair down the mid-line that descended behind the belt buckle and snap of Juan's Levi's. His thumb bushed across Juan's navel, bringing a sudden and searing image of another cavity he wanted to explore. At that, his cock gave a leap that threatened to rip out the fly of his Dockers.

Juan was no passive recipient of Troy's touches. His hands were busy, too. First, one delved into the hip pocket on Troy's right cheek, fingers digging into the bunched muscles. Then he drew it back and went to work on Troy's shirt. Once the tails were free, he managed to reach between them and start to undo the buttons.

When Juan finally found bare skin, the feathering touch of his fingers sent darts of raw fire skittering along Troy's nerves. He'd swear the other man had a blazing fever—both his hands and his body felt that hot. He groaned aloud.

Juan went still at the sound. "What's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

Troy shook his head, his teeth closing on Juan's lower lip just enough to maintain the contact, to persuade him not to pull away. "No way, man. Nothing ever felt better, but I know I want more, lots more. How about you?"

Something in the back of his mind was trying to holler

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warnings. *Slow down. Chill a minute. This is going way too far and too fast.* That voice might as well have told the spring wind to stop blowing. Conscience and logic had absolutely nothing to do with what was happening, and whatever was in control damn well did not want to slow down, not one mile per hour. Supersonic would have been too slow.

Still Juan finally succeeded in pulling back, breaking the contact of their mouths and moving until their bodies barely touched instead of grinding together like millwheels. They both panted, lungs suddenly starved for air as two hearts raced in a desperate rhythm, coursing heated blood in torrents.

Troy focused his gaze on Juan's face then, seeing in the other man's ebony eyes the amazement, confusion and need that must have been reflected in his own. He shook his head, but the cobwebs didn't clear.

"Oh, man, what's happening here? Somebody or something else just took hold and drove the bus for a few minutes there. Are you all right?"

Juan nodded slowly. "I think so. I— Well, it sure felt like it was meant to happen just that way. I think I'm scared shitless, but no way would I go back and undo any of it."

At that moment, Burrito Belle, who'd been busy on the pre-cleaning of their dishes before Troy got around to loading the dishwasher, trotted out of the kitchen. She reared to put her two small forefeet on Troy's right leg. Then she gave one sharp yap.

Startled, Troy and Juan both looked down at her. It was pretty clear she was trying to tell them something. Troy just couldn't guess what.

"What's the matter, girl? What are you trying to tell us?"

She yapped again, but this time more softly, almost a whine.

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Her thin little tail was going a mile a minute, though, and her expression didn't look like one of dismay or distress.

Juan laughed. "I think she's telling us she approves. If you were a girl, a lady, she might be jealous, but she's liked you from the very first. She wants to be sure we don't forget about her, though."

He pulled free of Troy's loose embrace and stooped, scooping Burrito Belle into his arms. She stretched up to lick his face, a quick swipe of her pink tongue across his chin and then back across his lips. That done she turned her head to look across at Troy. As clearly as if she had spoken the words, he read her intent. *Your turn.*

When he reached, she jumped from Juan's arms to his and then gave him exactly the same canine kiss. It didn't feel nearly as amazing as Juan's kisses, but he still found he didn't mind it. His first doggie kiss? Maybe. He couldn't recall a similar experience anyway.

Even though he'd grown up with old-fashioned, country raised parents who firmly believed dogs belonged outdoors, he'd always had his doubts. As far as Burrito Belle went, she wasn't really a dog anyway. Oh, her genetic makeup was canine, but she had to be an elf or imp in a dog suit. There was no question about that at all. He chuckled. The saucy little Chihuahua certainly had a way about her.

Although Burrito Belle's intervention had ratcheted down the sexual tension a few notches, Troy still felt the after-effects in a speeded heartbeat and a need to breathe deeply to bring his blood oxygen back up to normal.

Juan had started to turn away, but stopped with his profile to Troy. He had his hands clasped tightly as if to still their tremors.

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"I—I think I need to go clean up the kitchen."

"I'll help," Troy said. He wasn't ready to let the other man get too far away. They still needed to figure out what had happened and whether they were both willing to let it run its course or not. Until he was sure, he'd be pretty damn wired. He was not ready for this, not looking for it and not even sure he wanted it, but when lightning struck, what choice did a guy have?

* * *

They ended up in separate bedrooms. Troy cursed himself for not being brave enough to challenge Juan and either win or lose by one quick question, but he just couldn't do it. He told himself it was better not to move too fast. They were both under stress and maybe that was all it had been. Acting on a fluke might be stupid.

The next morning they were both walking on eggs as they shared coffee and the routine of getting ready for work. Juan had little to say as they got into Troy's SUV and headed down to the city.

Before Troy let him off behind El Capitan, he had to ask at least one question and he did. "You're going to come home with me again tonight." He phrased it as an order, but it was really a question.

Juan hesitated, one hand on the door and the other holding Burrito Belle. "Do you think those two are out on bail yet or would they still be in jail?"

Troy shrugged. "I don't know, but I can find out. A friend, a former college roommate of mine, works in the DA's office and I'm sure he'll know. But they aren't the only ones, are they?"

Juan didn't pretend not to understand. He shook his head. "No,

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no way. That particular bunch, the *Gato Negro* cartel...shit, they're all over, dozens, hundreds. The top man, maybe the top two or ten men, are invisible, of course, but they've got *segundos* and flunkies and... Well, you probably know how it is."

"So they'd still have someone watching, someone planning how to get to you, wouldn't they? I'm not even sure it's safe for you to take the stand out today, but I guess I can't make that decision for you."

"I can't roll over and play dead, Troy. I won't. But, yes, I'll go back with you tonight if you'll take me out to my uncle's first. We can maybe talk to him, warn him there might be trouble. Just him. I do not want to scare his wife and the kids. And I can get some of my stuff."

Troy nodded. "No problem. Keep your eyes open today and don't take any chances. If anything doesn't look right, call the cops right away. Then call me. I put my number in your cell while you were in the shower. It's speed dial three."

A flash of what might have been gratitude danced through Juan's expressive eyes. He gave Troy a tight smile. "*Gracias*. I will be very watchful and I'll see you at lunch time."

The morning dragged but Troy had enough work to keep from fretting too much. A few worried clients had to be reassured that most of their investments were still safe, and a young couple wanting to set up a college fund for their two small children took an hour to convince what was the best plan for them. Before he knew it, lunch time approached.

Right before he headed down to the ground floor, he looked out the window. Yes, there was Juan with *Burrito Belle's Comidero*. The noon rush had just begun and nothing looked out of order. *Good. Maybe I'm worrying too much. Like Juan said, he's small*

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potatoes and these creeps probably won't waste a lot of time and effort on him, especially when the cops have been called once already.

Halfway down the block, a chill premonition hit Troy like a fist in the gut. *Hurry. You need to be there now.* He seldom got one of those urgent messages from God knew where, but when he did, he'd learned he needed to heed them. Breaking into a jog, he dodged among the other pedestrians in his best old linebacker manner.

A single sharp bark, eloquent with distress, put him into an even faster pace, just short of a dead run. Burrito Belle was not a noisy, yappy dog. If she spoke, there was a reason.

When he got close enough to see the stand, he put on a final burst of speed. Another big, rough-looking Latino had Burrito Belle in one fist. In the other, he grasped the leash with which Juan clipped her to one of the corner posts. With a final jerk, the man tore the leash free. Then Juan grabbed the bright pink strap in both hands, hanging on for dear life.

"No, *por favor*, no. Leave *mi perrita* alone! I will go if that is what you want."

"If I want, I can take both of you or I can make a sausage out of this little one." The brute spoke with a sneer.

"The hell you say," Troy roared. He settled one hand on the gangster's shoulder. "Let the dog go."

He realized then a tug of war could be brutal for the little dog. Her delicate bones were too fine to withstand a lot of rough handling. *What's the best way to get her free without risking any harm?* A rush of ideas spun through his mind in the second or two it took the husky Latino to react.

Before the other man whipped around to face Troy, Juan let go,

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falling back against the side of the stand. Out of the corner of his eye, Troy saw the blood well from a raw gash across Juan's left palm. Probably one of the decorative studs on the leash had broken loose in the struggle and cut Juan. Then all Troy's attention focused on the man holding the dog. Burrito Belle gave a small squeal of pain as the would-be dognapper tightened his hold on her. Blunt fingers bit into her fragile shape, closing around her neck and ribs.

That sent a wave of red rage through Troy. What kind of slime ball would hurt a helpless little animal? He grabbed the man's wrist, the one that curved around the dog's trembling form. He dug his fingers in, using every bit of his strong grip. Releasing his clasp on the other man's shoulder, he dropped that hand to a hold just below the thug's elbow.

"Let go of the dog. Now. If you don't I'll break your fucking arm." Putting action to the threat, he twisted his hands in opposite directions.

As arm wrestling went, it was not an approved move, but this was not a normal bout. The opposing motions of his two hands visibly stretched the skin on the other man's arm, then the muscles beneath that skin began to twist as well. He gave a sharp gasp, but still looked defiant.

Troy's gaze darted back and forth between the man's face and his hand, still holding Burrito Belle. He saw the stress begin in the man's expression about the same time he saw and felt the involuntary relaxation of the other man's hand.

With a fear-driven supple twist, Burrito Belle broke free and made a flying leap toward Juan. Heedless of his bleeding hand, Juan reached to catch her. "*Ah, mi pobrecita! Vienes a papá.*" She huddled in his grip, making small whimpering sounds. Troy was

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not sure if she was hurt or just terrified. He'd try to figure that out in a moment.

A man stepped forward from the gathering crowd. He held a small but business-like handgun. "Get back," he said, with a jerk of his head seemingly directed at Troy.

Troy hesitated an instant. *Friend or foe?* It was hard to be sure, but he'd probably be better off to obey. He released the Latino man's arm and took a step back.

The thug, sweating now, slid a nervous glance to the gun.

Friend, I think. Relief washed over Troy but he still waited, poised for any action that might be necessary.

The Latino lifted both hands, holding them well clear of his body, of any possible hidden weapons. With some satisfaction, Troy noticed the hoodlum's right hand shook and that arm bore red marks where Troy had gripped it.

He shifted his glance to the man holding the gun. He was dark-skinned, but probably not a Mexican, and wore a neat suit, complete with a crisp light blue shirt and striped tie. Except for that weapon, he looked like a businessman, a lawyer or other professional.

Keeping his piece steady, the stranger glanced at Troy. "I know, you probably had things under control, but then again..." He left the sentence unfinished. He grinned. "Yeah, I already called the cops as soon as I saw something was wrong here. Now I just want to be sure the big tough dog snatcher doesn't take off." He gave the sobriquet a sarcastic twist.

Definitely not Mexican or Latino, at least not from across the line. Troy got that much from his lack of accent, although there was a subtle, guttural quality to his words that made Troy think of the speech of many of the local Native Americans.

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“Thanks for stepping in. I think I could’ve restrained him, but a little backup doesn’t hurt.”

About that time police officers arrived, two in a car and one on a motorcycle. They took a few minutes to assess the scene. The driver of the car, wearing sergeant’s stripes, took charge. “You can put that away, Sam,” he said, nodding at the man holding the pistol.

Sam slid the weapon into a holster in the middle of his back, hidden beneath his suit coat.

After the cops took the hulking hood away, Troy turned to Sam. He realized then he’d seen the man before, in the AmBank building even. Of course, a number of firms and agencies had offices there. “Thanks again for the support. There’s something about looking down the barrel of a gun that deflates anybody unless they’re too high for common sense.”

Sam smiled, humor dancing in his jet-black eyes. “Yeah, don’t I know that.” He extended his hand. “Sam Donaldson, BIA special agent. I just happened to be in town today, checking in at the local office. Thought I’d grab some lunch from Burrito Belle’s before heading back to the Rez. Got a case I’m working on there.”

“Well, glad you had the thought, but I think we’re about to close up shop here. Juan’s hurt.” He turned back to his friend. “Are you okay? How’s the hand?”

Juan still held Burrito Belle. He leaned against the side of the stand as if he might fall down without the support. Both man and dog looked on the verge of shock. Troy turned to the few people who still lingered. “I think we’re going to have to close for the day,” he said. “I’m sorry, but Mr. Garcia and his mascot both need to see doctors.”

Juan did not protest. He finally nodded. “I didn’t think they’d

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be back a second time or that *El Patron* would send more of his men to harass me. Maybe they think my brother told me things—but he didn't. I hadn't seen him for over a year. But for them to go after Burrito Belle—how can they know what she means to me? I found her when I was running from them, in El Paso. *Que malo*. This is not good.”

“Can you shut down while I go get my car? I know we need to have Burrito Belle checked by a vet. How about your hand? Is the cut deep?”

Juan had wrapped a couple of napkins around his left hand, but blood oozed through the paper. He shrugged. “Not too bad. It hurts some. Like a rope burn as well as a cut. I could only think how much I did not want to lose her so I held on as long as I could. Yes, I can close things if you can help me take the cart to the restaurant.”

Working together they quickly got that job done. Juan then waited at the restaurant while Troy went to get his car. He called his office while he walked back to the parking lot and told the receptionist he was going to be out for the rest of the day due to an emergency. She was obviously curious but did not question him.

There was no way he could concentrate on business, he rationalized, until he knew both Burrito Belle and Juan were all right and he'd worked out more ways to keep them both safe. That might be a bit of a challenge.

CHAPTER 4

By the time they got home to Troy's late that afternoon, Burrito Belle dozed in Juan's lap. She'd been given a mild tranquilizer to calm her nerves. Then Juan had some Rimadyl for later if she seemed to be in pain. Her cat scan had found no skeletal or internal injuries, which relieved both Troy and Juan greatly. She had some bruises on her shoulder and side, but was otherwise apparently unharmed except for the shock and fright.

They'd then gone to an urgent care clinic where Juan got several stitches to close the gash across his hand, a tetanus shot and some pain meds as well. After a quick stop at the home of Tio Tomás, it was time to head to Troy's. He'd taken an immediate liking to Tomás Calderon. The man accepted Juan's news very calmly. He then said he'd explain the situation to his family in the

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least alarming way he could, but he wanted them to be aware and cautious. Troy had to agree with the older man's approach.

Juan collected a few personal things while Troy and Tomás continued to talk. Tomás seemed to accept their friendship at face value and showed no alarm or dismay about the situation. He didn't seem startled or confused by Troy's concern for Juan's safety or any reasons behind it. That relieved Troy's mind. He didn't want to cause any conflict between Juan and his nearest relatives over their relationship, however it went.

"I'm the chef tonight," Troy announced as he let them in to the condo. "How do steak and some veggie kebobs cooked on the grill sound?"

Juan gave him a weak smile. "Very good, but it's only my left hand. I could still cook."

Troy shook his head. "No damn way. You need a night off. Go lie down a while and give your fur-girl some TLC. I'll take care of a couple of items of business I left hanging and then start dinner."

Juan nodded. "Okay. Call me when you're ready, and I will help finish things up."

The other man's very quietness worried Troy, but he knew his friend needed some rest and peace to sort things out in his own mind. Later they'd deal with how to handle this latest attack and then with their personal situation. He had a hunch the two were going to have to be worked on together since he was now involved with whatever Juan had to deal with. He didn't leave friends hanging out to dry and Juan was damn well a friend, a very special one. It could all come to a head soon, but there were times an all-out charge was not the best way to make a score. Patience and cunning had a place in the game of life, too, even if neither felt like his strong suit right now.

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He hummed the old CCR tune “Bad Moon Rising” as he headed for his home office to check his email and landline phone. His dad and two uncles had been ’Nam vets and he’d developed an affinity for the music of their youth. It often seemed to speak to him as well. Danger and hard times seemed to be a recurring theme in life.

* * *

When Troy slipped into the guestroom over an hour later, he came to a sharp halt, looking down at the sleeping pair on the bed. Juan lay on his side, knees drawn up, and his bandaged hand resting palm up near his bottom shoulder. That arm circled the tan shape of Burrito Belle, curled even more tightly, as close to Juan’s body as she could get. His right hand rested over her like a sheltering tent. He’d slipped off his shoes, but was still dressed otherwise.

A surge of protectiveness such as he’d felt at times for his younger brother and sisters swept through Troy, but this time it was seasoned by a sexual overtone so powerful it nearly stole his breath. The power of that feeling was too compulsive to resist. He had to be close to this man, someone he still barely knew, but for whom he’d developed an admiration and regard he’d never felt for any living soul.

Moving slowly, heedless of the cooling meal that waited in the kitchen, Troy eased down on the bed. He shifted to spoon against Juan’s back and then stretched his arm out to encompass both man and dog. Burrito Belle stirred with a faint sound just stronger than a sigh. Juan hardly moved. Troy pressed his face into the back of Juan’s neck, inhaled the light citrusy scent of his aftershave

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lingering there and felt the silky tickle of the hair that brushed the other man's collar.

With a muffled murmur, Juan turned, rolling his head in Troy's direction. As he shifted, his ass pressed tighter against Troy's groin, stirring a swift reaction. It had been almost twenty-four hours since their first kiss—more than time to do it again, as far as Troy was concerned. Troy levered up on his left arm as he reached with his right, sliding his fingers along Juan's jaw to turn his head a few degrees more until Troy could reach the other man's lips.

At some point in this process, Juan came awake. Troy sensed the first instant of awareness, although the signs were subtle. Yet Juan's response made all of it even more intense: Juan turning farther to press closer, Juan's lips merging and clinging to Troy's. Fine tremors danced along Troy's nerves as arousal swept over them both, sending arcing webs of energy and excitement to heighten the sensation of every touch.

In the heat of the moment, they both almost forgot Burrito Belle. She had the innate sense to scoot to one side where she was clear of the two much bigger bodies that began to tangle in amorous urgency. She scrambled up to perch atop the pillows. From there she watched her two heroes with a benign doggie smile, as if to say, *Yes, this is going to work out just fine.*

Juan rolled right into Troy's arms as they kissed with urgent, hungry nips at each other's lips, tangling tongues dancing in a parody of the intense union yet to come. Juan's bandaged left hand was of little use, but he got yeoman service from the right. Still possessing two, Troy took on the task of divesting them both of their restrictive clothing as quickly as possible. A few buttons flew as he yanked at his oxford shirt. Juan's tee rolled up easily until Troy could haul it over the other man's head, in between their

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kisses.

Belts and zippers were next and then they both wiggled out of their trousers, underwear going along for the ride.

Skin to skin felt incredible. The eager nudge of Juan's cock between Troy's thighs felt even better, while his prick, tracing a moist path across Juan's tight lower abs, ached for release. A moment later, Juan's good hand found it. He wrapped his fingers tight around the shaft, stroking slowly from base to tip. Troy bit back a moan of dizzy pleasure.

Finally, he had to pull away before he exploded. "Hold on a few. Let's take this just a little slower." Drawing free, he got up on his knees and shifted to the side. Bending forward, he began to kiss and lick a path down Juan's sleek torso. Alternating tongue and lips, he traced along the collarbones, dipped into the hollow below Juan's Adam's apple, sketched down the midline almost to the navel, back up to tease each flat tan nipple with a slight suck and then down again. Lower and still lower, slowly, tauntingly.

Juan twisted and made small whimpering sounds. His cock stood at attention, quivering as a diamond-bright drop of pre-cum poised on the tip and then trickled to one side. Troy swooped down and caught that runnel with the tip of his tongue.

Murmuring broken words in Spanish, Juan pleaded for release, but Troy held him down, one hand spread across his chest and the other pinning his good arm against his side. All Juan could do was twist and arch, dig his heels into the bedding and beg. After a moment Troy released Juan's arm to clasp his cock, then moved just enough to take its length between his lips. He sucked for a moment, sliding down only a few millimeters and back, ran his tongue around the groove beneath the head, and took a few more drops of clear liquid with feather-light licks across the slit.

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"Ahora! Por favor, ahora. You are making me loco!"

Troy chuckled, finding devilish delight in tormenting the Latino in the most exquisite ways. *"Uno momento,"* he said, speaking around a mouthful of quivering, tawny prick. But after another moment, he decided the teasing had gone far enough. He moved again to kneel between Juan's knees and administered the best blowjob he could.

Despite Juan's entreating words, Troy took his time. He worked over Juan's prick like an ice cream cone, lick by lick, then slowly sucked it in, at first just the head and then as much as he could take, until the tip bumped his soft palate. He steadied the base with one hand while with the other he gently rolled Juan's balls, fingering the rumpled skin of the sac before moving past that to circle slowly around Juan's anus, teasing but not quite exploring—he'd save that for later.

It became a labor of love as he savored every sound and movement of Juan's pleasure. After long minutes, the smaller man came in an explosive rush, arched once and collapsed into a limp sated sprawl.

"Todos santos! Never, never have I felt anything like that. I do not know how to say it. I am not sure I can even show you."

Troy grinned. "That's okay. I just figured you needed some real powerful TLC. It's been a rough couple of days. Want some dinner? I kind of forgot about that for a while, but stuff shouldn't be too cold yet."

Before Juan could recover enough to try any payback, Troy scrambled off the bed and began to dress. He tossed Juan's clothes onto the linens as he sorted them out from his own. He couldn't stop grinning at the stunned look Juan still wore. He was pretty sure the younger man had never known the feeling of letting

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anyone do for and take care of him.

Let him get used to it. It's his turn, by God.

* * *

A few seconds in the microwave had the steaks and kebobs back to fresh-off-the-grill heat. They sat on the balcony to eat, watching the last of the sunset fade to gray. Once the glow was gone, the temperature began to drop quickly. In the dry air, extreme swings from high and low were common. It would probably be in the lower forties tonight, although midday had seen well above eighty.

Troy gathered their few dishes and carried them into the kitchen, Juan on his heels. Burrito Belle tagged along, looking hopefully at the two plates. There was hardly more than a hint of meat flavor left, but Troy put them down so she could see for herself. A few quick swipes with her tongue took care of all there was. Dishes now prewashed, Troy put them in the dishwasher, while Juan fidgeted.

"There is nothing for me to do," he complained. "I'm not used to this!"

Troy shot him a quick look, softened with a smile. "It can't be too bad. Enjoy it, get used to it. You're not here to wait on me. As long as we're sharing a home, it's going to be an equal effort. We both have day jobs and we both have chores at home. That's how my mother raised me—none of us kids got a free ride so I don't expect one here either."

Juan nodded after a moment of thought. "Okay, I guess I can do that." A smile danced through his eyes before it appeared in his lips. "Sometimes I still have trouble believing you're for real. I

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have never had a friend like you, never knew people could be so kind and giving. Except family, but that's expected, almost mandatory."

Hoping Juan had eased in his pride and determination to hang tough despite all that had happened, Troy followed his guest into the living room. Then he broached the subject he figured would be touchy. "About tomorrow and next week, until we find out how all this will go down..."

Juan settled in one of the matched pair of recliners angled to get a view of both the TV and the panorama shown by the picture window. Burrito Belle curled on his lap. His bandaged hand rested palm up on his thigh and the other curled protectively over the dog. He shrugged in a gesture eloquent of a tangle of the thoughts and emotions also visible in his eyes.

"What about it? We can't—at least I can't—put life on hold with no idea how long this shit is going to continue. I said I was not going to give up my life. That would be as big a victory for them as my death would be. It would be a death really, just slower and not criminal." Although his speech was defiant, before he finished, his shoulders slumped. He looked down at the sleeping dog in his lap and stroked her tenderly.

Troy pursued the obvious advantage Juan's attitude provided. "What about her? That hood could have killed or snatched her today. Almost succeeded at least in grabbing her. Can you risk more of that?"

Before Juan could respond, Troy's phone sounded in the jaunty march he'd set as his main ringtone. He did not recognize the number, but answered anyway. The voice on the other end was heavily accented, cold, and as deadly a warning as the buzz of a cornered rattler. "This is not your fight, gringo. Butt out. Put the

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cholo back on the street where he belongs and let nature take its course. If you do that now, we will not involve you anymore. But if you do not, you have never seen trouble such as will come. Your *mariposa* boy is not worth it, is he?"

With a growl of disgust, Troy disconnected. He had an unlisted number, but he knew there were ample ways a determined person could find it. He jammed the phone back in the clip.

For a moment he did not respond to Juan's questioning look. "Sales call," he said after a moment. "An obnoxious one." He sucked in a slow breath and concentrated on leveling his emotions and his voice.

"I think I'll go ahead and call my bud in the DA's office, a guy whose part of the counter-drug task force. Maybe I can speed this up and help get these guys off your back, but you've got to stay out of sight for a few days. Hell, why don't you take a vacation? How long have you been there on the corner every day without a break?"

He could see the other man pondering. Juan flexed his hand, the cut one. He lowered Burrito Belle to the floor, paced to the window and stood there gazing out into the night. He jammed his good hand into a pocket of his jeans and started to do the same with the other. It wouldn't fit and probably hurt when he tried to compress it, bandage and all. He muttered a phrase in Spanish that Troy did not understand, but it sounded like cuss words and frustration.

Before he could reconsider, Troy dialed Martin Becker, his district attorney friend. Even if it was nearly nine, this was important enough not to delay. Martin picked up on the second ring, almost as if he was expecting a call.

"Hi, Martin, Troy here. I was wondering if there's any decision

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or action on those Mexican nationals picked up at noon yesterday. I'm concerned whether they'll be held, released, deported or what. I'd hate to think they were back on the streets."

He heard Martin's dry chuckle. "You got yourself mixed up with a bad crew, didn't you? But don't worry—they won't be free too soon, Troy. Those two have long rap sheets and it doesn't do any good to send them back across the border. They keep returning like bad pennies. Unless someone in Mexico applies a lot of pressure through the State Department, they'll be locked up for a good long while. You know there's more where they came from, though."

"Already heard from a couple of them," Troy replied. "I'll tell Lieutenant Bandera about that part tomorrow. It looks like this flood just keeps coming."

"We're working on it, working hard. The Border Alliance Enforcement Group is closing in on some of the higher members of this particular cartel. In a few more weeks, we might have a dam back in place for a while. Meanwhile, just be careful, you and your friend with the taco stand."

"Oh, you can count on that. He'll be at my place for a while, a kind of safe house."

"Good thought. I'll keep you posted, Troy. I understand your concern."

When Troy hung up and turned back to Juan, the other man was watching him with a question in his expression. Apparently, Troy's face told him the gist of the story right away.

"All right, I'll lie low for a bit." Juan coughed out the words on a harsh exhalation. "This week, only this week. If it isn't over by then, I may not take Burrito Belle, but I will be back on my corner."

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Troy nodded. "Maybe it'll be long enough. Ready to call it a night?"

Without looking back, he headed for his bedroom, where he grabbed the remote to turn on the TV to watch the evening news and started to undress. He decided to leave to Juan the choice of whether to join him or go to the other room instead. Maybe Burrito Belle made the choice. She scampered in, bounced up onto the bed by way of the under-bed storage drawer than never seemed to get pushed all the way in and curled up as if she was right at home. Juan had no alternative but to follow. He didn't look too reluctant, though.

"I've got a king-sized shower. Care to join me?" Troy made the offer as offhandedly as he could, barely glancing Juan's way. "You can put a surgical glove on your hand to keep the bandage dry. I've got some under the sink for doing chores."

Nude, he strode across to the bath, turned on the water and stepped into the glass-enclosed stall. A moment later, Juan joined him. Before Troy had a chance to ask what Juan intended, the smaller man was on his knees in front of Troy. The next instant he had a hand wrapped firmly around Troy's prick, his good hand, of course, and it didn't take him more than a few seconds to capture Troy's attention completely.

Troy leaned his shoulders against the cool tile of the wall, braced his feet, and let pure sensation take over. *Man, this guy sure knows what he's doing....* After a few accelerating strokes, Juan engulfed Troy's dick in his mouth. That felt even more amazing. Troy clutched at the safety bar, needing to hang onto something stable as heat spiraled through him.

Every drop of blood seemed to rush from the rest of his extremities to the small head between Juan's lips. His whole body

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shuddered with the intensity as he spiraled upward at supersonic speed to the crest of sensation. He hung there a moment, dizzy, hard, hurting, needing, and yet not wanting it to end. Finally, he couldn't wait any longer and, with a sharp thrust, he shot off in the most explosive climax he could ever recall.

Juan didn't release him until the last spasm ended, which somehow made the act even more special. For an instant Troy recalled blood brotherhood rituals he'd undergone with friends years ago. Though different, Juan's action held some of the same emotions, as if it created an insoluble bond between them. He realized he'd fisted a hand in Juan's dark hair as the final shockwaves barreled through him. When he saw how fiercely he held the other man, he let go, but Juan did not seem to mind. He rocked back slowly on his heels and looked up at Troy, a mixture of smug satisfaction and a trace of uncertainty in his expressive face. "That was good?"

Troy shook his head. "Hell, no. Good? What kind of bullshit is that? It was outstanding to off the rating scale. Incredible is what it was. Man, if I was to call you an Olympic-class cocksucker, it would be neither an insult nor undeserved."

He caught Juan's arms and tugged him to feet. "I'll scrub your back if you'll scrub mine, okay?" He intended to diffuse the tension. He partly succeeded. They did scrub each other's backs, kissed a few times, teased and finally turned the water off before it got totally cold. Excitement had settled to a low, manageable hum, like the musical pitch of high-tension wires on a hot day. For now, Troy could live with that, even sleep with it.

Before the news was over, Juan had fallen asleep. Troy looked down at him, the protective concern again catching him by surprise. He seemed to feel about Juan almost the same way Juan

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felt about the small dog, snuggled close to his chest. Man and dog both slept peacefully, as if they sensed they were safe here—even that their place here was not just for this night but always.

Gazing at them for a long, thoughtful moment before he settled down to go to sleep himself, Troy renewed his vow to keep them safe, both his new friend and the feisty little dog who had won her way into his heart as well. They were really something, something very special, something far too precious to let slip away or come to harm.

Troy's lips curled into a slow smile. He hadn't been ready for a relationship, had thought he didn't have the time and energy to create one. Well, maybe he'd been wrong. Fate or some unseen force seemed to think so anyway. This was starting to look like the real thing and he wouldn't miss it for the world.

Whatever it cost...

No price, he decided, short of life itself could be too high. For better or worse, he was Burrito Belle's gringo guy and Juan's, too.

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 *Special Delivery*
by Deirdre O'Dare,
available at AmberAllure.com!**

Monte's sporting goods store is teetering on the edge of collapse due to the economic problems. The small conservative eastern California town he chose for his dream project is not welcoming, even though he keeps his gay lifestyle quiet. Then big trouble and a gorgeous package delivery driver fall into his world at the same time. Are they somehow connected?

Jeff, a special agent for Homeland Security, is working undercover to help bust a contraband and drug operation. Tracks lead to the small town of Cameron Creek, California. Who is the crime ring's contact at this end? As a delivery driver, Jeff is scoping things out. When he meets Monte, he is smitten at once, but evidence begins to link this new friend to the case. Jeff has every reason not to pursue a relationship, but can he stop himself?

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