



Schnickelfritz In Love

— A Canine Cupid Story —

Deirdre
O'Dare



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...“Sonuvabitch! The next thing I knew, bam, felt like a sledgehammer bashed me from behind. Now the bastards got away. Shit.”

“Are you okay?” Boz had to ask, even if it was an inane question. “Give yourself a minute before you try to get up. A concussion is nothing to mess with. Where did they hit you?”

Jake raised a hand and ran it gingerly down the back of his head. “Here, just at the base of the skull, I think. That’s the tender spot anyway. At the time it felt like a steel plate had hit the whole back of my head, like a truck had hit me.”

“Well, we know someone was here. I’ll call my back-up and get a fingerprint kit out here. We’ll dust the room and see if we can pick up anything. And you can check to see if anything’s missing. I figure we’re safe to use a light now. They’re gone and they know we’re after them.”

Jake growled an incoherent mumble of rage that finally shaped into words. “Fuckin’ lousy bastards. I shoulda had eyes in the back of my head. Whoever got me didn’t make a sound. I was listening, paying attention, or I thought I was. I guess I was too focused on the guy in the room, though.”

Boz chuckled, relieved it hadn’t been any worse. “Good thing you have a Swede’s hard head.”

He started to rise at the same instant Jake began to struggle to his feet. Somehow, they wound up grabbing at one another in an effort to find their balance. What happened next was completely unplanned, unexpected and unbelievable. They ended up wrapped in each other’s arms, bodies straining together, as their mouths melded in a heated and urgent kiss...

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BY

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SCHNICKELFRITZ IN LOVE
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*This one is for Nancy and “Pinto”
with a nod to the great breed rescue groups who work selflessly
to save lost and abandoned dogs and find for them
loving forever homes. A million dogs and their happy new families
thank you, but it can never be enough! Brightest
blessings on all of you and your charges.*

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and patient of editors! A furry halo for you, my friend!
Smiles, hugs and heartfelt mil gracias as well.*

CHAPTER 1

Las Cruces, New Mexico
August 12, 4:30 P.M.

Jake Rasmussen stuck his key into the lock and gave it a twist. The battered door swung inward, releasing a welcome blast of cool air and a rocket-propelled bundle of fuzzy energy. Snick—formally known as *Schnickelfritz Schnauzerstein*—damn near ran up one side of his master and down the other.

“Awright, ya little shitbird. You’re glad to see me. That’s cool. I’m glad to see you, too, but you’ve got too fuckin’ much enthusiasm. Gimme a minute, will ya? After I have a beer, we’ll go to the dog park. Promise.”

The Miniature Schnauzer wove between Jake’s legs and

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twisted in dizzy circles around him as he made his way across the stamp-sized living room of his apartment to the kitchen alcove, jerked open the fridge door, and pulled out a brown bottle. That first cold swig was pure heaven after long hours at work in the Las Cruces August steam. The monsoon season was in full swing and a dry heat it was not. A passing shower had just made the air feel more like a sauna.

Jake set the beer on the dinette table and dug a rumpled bandana from a pocket of his jeans to wipe the runnels of sweat off his face. Something about coming in to a cooler place and taking a few cold swallows really got it running. With a little luck, he could postpone Snick's afternoon expedition for half an hour or so. Not that it would be much cooler, but every little bit helped.

He ambled back to the living room and flopped into the comfort of his worn recliner. "Can we watch the five o'clock news first, buddy?"

The dog seemed to consider this for a moment, then hopped up to perch on Jake's knees. The man reached for the remote, then remembered he'd left his beer in the kitchen.

Aw, shit. Well, it won't get too warm for a few minutes. I ought to teach this mutt to fetch. Ha, first I'd have to be smarter than the dog. For the half-Greek son of a Swedish sailor, who barely got through high school, that might not be possible. Jake punctuated the thought with a wry chuckle. If Snick was an example, Schnauzers were damn smart dogs.

Snick was charcoal gray, and the bristly hair around his face gave him an old-man look that his bright eyes and abundant energy belied. Jake had just happened to see the notice from the local animal shelter—too many dogs meant some of them would have to go soon, either by adoption or by being put to sleep. Although he'd

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loved dogs as a kid, his mom had refused to allow one, citing the family's frequent moves. His construction work still kept him moving often, yet he thought he could fit a smaller dog into his life. After all, he'd always gotten along with his friend's dogs, often even better than they did.

Snick, the shelter people told him, had been a puppy mill stud for the first few years of his life. Taken in a raid along with a bunch of others, he was just a tad past the cute puppy stage that appealed to many seeking a pet. He was also a bit cantankerous at times, but had improved with some socializing by the shelter staff in the weeks he'd been housed there. Despite the dog's shortcomings, Jake took to the feisty little guy at once and brought him home the next day. Actually, they were a pretty good match—two loners with some bad baggage from the past and a well-hidden need to have someone to care for. They'd been together over a year now. So far it worked.

At five-thirty Jake left the comfort of his recliner with some reluctance, snapped the leash onto Snick's collar, and headed down the street two blocks to the nearest park, a dog-friendly one with a fenced area where canine citizens could frolic off leash safe from traffic, while other park visitors were safe from them.

Before they got there, Snick was all but walking on air. He knew this drill well. Freedom! Frolic! Fun! Things to sniff and a hundred spots to pee on; maybe some other dogs he could growl at or wrestle with. The place was sheer paradise from a dog's point of view.

Once inside the gate, Jake removed the leash. Not a second later, Snick took off at a dead run, so fast he was just a gray blur. Jake shook his head as he wandered to a shaded bench to sit down. *If only I had a tenth of that damn dog's energy...* This new job

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promised to be a real challenge. Normally he liked challenges, but sometimes they mushroomed to gigantic proportions, and this looked like it'd be one of them, especially since it was his first as team leader for the electricians.

* * *

Boz Corwin actually got home early for a change. Despite his involvement with the seemingly endless drug and gang investigations, the day had been relatively slow for the Las Cruces Police Department. As soon as he reached his little adobe house on the edge of the gallery district, he dumped his shoulder holster and Kevlar vest, snapped a lead on Athena and headed for the dog park. Even though the park was about five blocks from his home, the walk was a welcome bit of quiet, fresh air, and his first chance to put the worrisome and wearying details of the day into perspective.

Thank God for Athena. She gave him a reason to get out, as well as a precious dose of sanity and unwavering loyalty to balance the seamy side of life in which he had his nose rubbed every day. Working vice had not been an uplifting experience. Working drugs and gangs was even more depressing. Athena gave him something totally outside that dismal world.

The retired greyhound had the patience of a saint, at least with him. Even if he came in late and grumpy, she was unfailingly glad to see him, tolerated his growls and curses, and waited with something like stoic calm until he was ready to take her out. Normally he didn't keep her waiting too long. She never made a mess in the house, however late he might be, and she'd never been destructive or rowdy. She was an absolute lady, something

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refreshingly distant from the females he normally encountered.

The dog park seemed quiet. Boz noted a big man dozing on a bench and a woman with two small kids and a puppy at the far end of the park. The rest of the grassy area was empty. He shut the gate behind him and then released Athena's leash. She cocked her head to look up at him as if for permission before she started away, moving with the grace of a gazelle. He knew she could run like the wind. Maybe later he'd throw her ball a few times and let her run, but for now, she was content to sniff, squat and explore in a lazy way.

There was some rudimentary agility equipment set up at one side of the park. He knew a group practiced there on weekends and had even watched a few times, amazed at the nimble Aussies, the clownish terriers and diverse other dogs as they went through their paces. Athena watched, never showing any desire to join in the fun. He knew her racing days had put a lot of stress on her lean body. So far she wasn't showing any signs of arthritis or trauma, so he didn't want to push her. Besides, he didn't have the time for a lot of training.

Today, for some reason, she did wander over to that area, though, and moved quietly among the poles, ramps and teeter-totter, sniffing curiously. All at once, a gray streak flashed past him heading toward the much taller, leaner dog. The little dog, a funny looking guy with a square, bristly face, ran in circles around her, barking urgently.

He reared up on his hind legs to sniff her butt. For once, she did not sit down or spin away. Athena usually played the professional virgin and got indignant about any liberties taken. Her behavior was unusual enough to make Boz watch.

The next thing he knew, the damned little mutt had her backed

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up to one of the ramps, scrambled up it, and was in the process of trying to hump the taller female. Amazingly, Athena looked to be cooperating!

What the fuck?

Athena was spayed. He'd had that done the first week he got her, so what was with this perverted little scrap of dogdom? He wasn't even sure what kind of dog it was. He never paid much attention to little mutts anyway, simply categorizing them as either barking rats or barking dust mops, depending on their overall appearance. This guy wasn't quite either one, but he sure was a randy little bugger.

Boz looked around for the owner. Obviously not the woman with the kids and the spaniel puppy, at least he didn't think so. She was studiously ignoring the whole thing and trying to divert her two children's attention. *Must be the big guy.* He seemed to be awake now and was watching, shaking his head a bit.

"Get your fornicating dog off of mine," Boz yelled. "She's spayed, but that's not the point. This is a public park, and owners are supposed to keep their dogs under control. That mutt of yours is about as out of control as he can be."

The big man stood and started, not toward the dogs but in Boz's direction. "Cool your jets, dude. Your dog's not exactly struggling to get away. She could grab mine and throw him across the park if she didn't want to play. Let them have their fun. Mine's fixed, too, by the way, so he's shooting blanks."

Boz saw the other man topped him by a good four inches and probably more than fifty pounds, all of it muscle. Even though he had plenty of training in self-defense and martial arts for his work, it would be pretty stupid to pick a fight with a bruiser like the mutt's master. Boz's mom hadn't raised any dumb kids.

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He had to admit the sight of the little gray dog clinging to Athena's lean hips and humping away was pretty damn funny. The act was not going to produce any mismatched pups, so what was the harm in it? Athena could certainly move if she didn't want the attention, even if it left the gray mutt hanging upside down by his willy.

As the owner drew near, Boz turned to take a better look at him. The sight was enough to stop Boz in his tracks. This big man was one good-looking son of a gun. The faded T-shirt he wore hugged a muscled torso worthy of a Mr. USA competition. Thick wavy hair the color of dark chocolate surrounded a rugged face, burned brown from what had surely been long hours in the western sun. Brilliant blue eyes contrasted with his ruddy skin. The effect was mesmerizing. When he quit scowling and grinned, Boz had to grin back.

The big man stuck out a massive, work-hardened hand. "I'm Jake. The dog's name is Schnickelfritz, but I call him Snick. Since our canine kids seem to be hitting it off so well, guess we should get acquainted."

Boz accepted the handshake and introduced himself. "Boz Corwin. Athena's my fur-girl's name. She's purebred greyhound, raced in her youth they told me. Best lady a man could have around. What kind of dog is your bud there?"

"Snick's a Miniature Schnauzer. The shelter people said he'd been a stud in a puppy mill. They neutered him before I took him. Looks like he hasn't forgotten what it's all about, though. If I'd seen what he was trying to do, I'd have called him back, but I guess I dozed off. Nobody around and I didn't figure he'd get into too much trouble. My bad."

Jake's little boy grin was so appealing it ought to be illegal.

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Boz mentally shook himself and tried to back off from the surge of attraction that swept over him.

Shit, five minutes ago I was pissed and now... Man, no fuckin' way. Big, sweaty laboring-type guys aren't my thing. This bruiser'd probably deck me if I made a pass at him anyway. Just 'cause our dogs are getting it on doesn't mean we should.

CHAPTER 2

From then on, although it wasn't quite every day, they began to meet at the dog park frequently. Jake told himself he didn't look forward to seeing Athena and Boz, but he knew that wasn't quite honest. Snick sure did, and, to be truthful, Jake wasn't much more reluctant.

Athena really was a sweet dog. She stood three times as tall as Snick, sleek and classy as an exotic sports car. Shy, though, and slow to take up with people. She stuck to Boz like Super Glue most of the time, but seemed to take a shine first to Snick and then to Jake. She came bounding to greet them now with her slender tail fanning eagerly. Talk about the odd couple, though. Fuzzy, belligerent, little Snick was the tramp to her lady, for sure.

He learned Boz and Athena lived about five blocks in the

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opposite direction from the apartment he shared with Snick. While the dogs sniffed around and played doggie games, Jake and Boz had begun to talk. They both liked ethnic food, whether Mexican, Italian, Chinese or Middle Eastern, and patronized some of the same little restaurants hidden in odd corners throughout Old Town. They both read a lot when they had time—thrillers mostly or true war and crime stories. They both had a penchant for the eighties music they'd grown up with, even while admitting a lot of it was not exactly classic. Finding subjects to talk about never seemed hard, although they tended to avoid personal matters.

Jake wasn't even sure yet what Boz did for a living. The smaller man was close-mouthed about his work, making a vague comment about security when Jake mentioned he was in the construction business. Jake had shrugged it off as not important anyway. Hell, he wasn't planning on having a relationship with the man, was he?

The sudden realization the idea had indeed crossed his mind threw him for a loop. He'd always been into casual easy come and easy go kinds of hook-ups. He wanted nothing he could not walk away from without looking back when a job ended and it was time to hit the road again. He'd learned that trick in the navy, and so far, it had served him well.

Something about Boz just didn't seem to lend itself to such a casual connection, so he hadn't even hinted at anything more than their current casual friendship. The smaller man displayed an intensity that seemed to indicate a dead-serious approach to life, even though he affected a flippant, satirical manner.

Suddenly, it was September. The steamy afternoons of the summer rainy season turned drier, while the early morning air held a hint of fall. This far south, winter did not amount to much, but

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the change of seasons was still a factor, a welcome one for most of the residents. Fall was a good time for construction work—few worries about material or incomplete work getting wet and none about frost or blizzards. With luck, the company would have the new medical complex completed by the end of the year.

Jake's team was responsible for the complete electrical system, powerful and secure enough to ensure critical diagnostic and surgical equipment functioned without a hitch and life-support was absolutely guaranteed for those patients who required it. He took the responsibility seriously and kept a close eye on every wire run and every connection made. Everything had built-in backup provisions and they'd wire in a massive generator to pick up in a nanosecond during any failures of the regular power grid. Thus, he was personally disturbed when newly installed wires began to turn up missing and critical components his men swore had been placed disappeared.

Management was furious, of course, because these losses cost them twice, in labor to redo work and in replacing expensive materiel. Jake took the situation to heart as if it reflected on his supervision. He began to watch his men even more closely to be sure none of them were pulling out stuff to sell, maybe to go to Mexico or to wildcat construction projects run by unlicensed contractors working under the radar.

With the current economic problems, the sale of copper from wire and state-of-the-art electronic components could bring in supplemental income for many. He knew a thriving black market existed. Frustrated with his inability to find out what was happening, Jake knew some relief when he learned the company had hired added security people and called on local law enforcement as well. He'd heard hints the thefts could be tied to

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local drug and gang activity since the facility was near the edge of a district where rival gangs held sway.

One morning, the superintendent called Jake aside as soon as he came on shift. Jake would join a meeting with the LCPD detective in charge at eight o'clock. Jake waited at the modular office where the super hung out, impatient at the delay in the day's work. His assistant would get things going, but he wanted to be there himself.

He did a double take when he saw the now-familiar figure striding toward him, even if the greyhound was not at the man's side. *Boz? What the hell is he doing here?*

Boz seemed equally shocked. He came to an abrupt halt a few paces from Jake. "*You're Mr. Rasmussen, the electrical foreman?*"

"One and the same. And you—by chance are you Detective Lieutenant Corwin? Oh, man, I never made the connection. You mentioned security, but it didn't register."

Pete Landers, the super, stepped out of the office at that moment. "You guys know each other? Well, that'll save some time getting acquainted. You both know what's going on, so as soon as we set some basic ground rules, I'll leave you to the details."

"We met at the dog park with our fur kids," Jake explained. "We had no idea what the other guy did for a living. Guess we do now."

He spent the rest of the morning walking Boz through the complex, showing him where wires had been pulled out and missing modules should be. Boz asked pointed questions, especially about the background checks on the men who made up Jake's crew and other tradesmen who were working in the same areas.

"We've got a serious drug and gang problem here," Boz

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admitted. “The city tries to keep it quiet, but this close to the border, there’s a lot of spill-over from the drug wars going on in Mexico. I’ve heard some of the cartels plant people in a variety of jobs and activities. It’s a way to launder money, pilfer valuable commodities and get footholds in a lot of unexpected places. We tend to think of gang members as street kids, dropouts from school, unemployed and so on. That’s not always the case, though. Stereotypes rarely tell the whole story.”

Jake nodded. “I don’t suspect any of my men have that kind of background. They all checked out clean, but we do have some day laborers in and out, people hired just for a short-term need. I don’t think they’re vetted much if it all, and you can’t keep them under surveillance all the time. If there’s a problem, that’s probably where it’s at.”

“I’ll be coming in for a few days with that kind of cover myself,” Boz said. “Keep it quiet, of course. I’m fluent in Spanish and, although I’m black Irish, I can pass for Latino and do often enough. I don’t know where I’ll be ‘working,’ but I’ll be around. Just so you know. No double takes or friendly chatter when I show up, okay?”

He smiled and Jake had to grin back. “You got it. If you show up here, I’ll put your ass to work.”

* * *

Boz scratched Athena’s ears, hesitating more than usual to head for the dog park. “So your little buddy’s papa’s an industrial electrician, girl. And a boss. Should’ve guessed, maybe. He’s got an air of authority and assurance that doesn’t fit a common laborer. It doesn’t make any difference to you, and it shouldn’t to me

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either, but it caught me off guard. Usually I pick up on things faster. Think I'm slipping?"

Athena sat back on her haunches and regarded him with a serious stare, as if she pondered the import of his words. Then she gave a doggy grin and thumped her tail several times. She jumped up, grabbed her leash from its hook by the door, and turned to look back at him.

Come on...quit jawing and let's go. She couldn't have said it any plainer if she could speak the words aloud.

Boz laughed. "Okay, girl. None of this angst and confusion for you, is there? Maybe I need to take a page from your book. Let's go see if Snick and Jake have beat us to the park tonight."

They had. Snick flew across the fading grass as soon as he saw them and was waiting when they reached the gate, wiggling with impatience. Jake sauntered over with a casual air that didn't quite fit his expression.

"Wondered if you were going to make it this evening," he said. "After the dogs have their romp, what do you say we get together for dinner at Mama Conchita's and talk about this joint project a little more?"

Boz hesitated. He couldn't see any harm in it, even if somehow such a meeting had the feel of taking their friendship up a notch. Was he ready for that? Still, if they had a basic plan laid out, it could make working the case easier. They wouldn't be too conspicuous in a quiet corner of the small neighborhood café where they could talk more freely than they had at the construction site. Their unwritten rule that dog park talk stayed casual seemed to curtail having such a discussion here. As if the "kids" couldn't be exposed to serious matters. That was stupid, even though Boz couldn't deny it felt right.

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After a moment, he shrugged, just a small twitch of one shoulder. “Sure. Meet you there about seven?”

Jake glanced at his watch. “Yeah, that’ll give me time to fix Snick’s dish and then hike over to the restaurant. There’s not much room to park around there so I usually just walk.”

“Works for me,” Boz agreed. He turned to watch the dogs, one way to keep his gaze off Jake and deny the concerns building about the possible hazards of working more closely with this man who already was making inroads into his careful shelter of isolation.

Undercover dicks should stay that way—in both senses. At the thought, his twitched in a way that left little doubt as to its ideas about the situation. *Down, boy. We’re not playing that game.*

Jake was one sexy, fascinating man. There was no way Boz could deny the attraction he’d felt from the first, but feeling and acting on it were two different things. He had plenty of practice keeping his feelings, the whole spectrum of them, under wraps. In vice you saw people you had to sympathize with as well as those you loathed from the first glimpse. Although many were even superficially charming and charismatic, you very rarely revealed any emotions because it could give a criminal dangerous leverage to use against you.

Boz had always played the hand he was dealt, but “cool hand” was his middle name. Many people had told him his dark eyes could be as opaque as anthracite, and he knew he had his poker face down to a fine science. He could and would work with Jake and anyone else he needed to, but he’d keep his personal distance. Most of the time he believed survival demanded it.

* * *

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Jake's spontaneous invitation surprised him as much as it had apparently startled Boz. The impulsive words settled in his gut with a thud as he caught the shutters sliding closed in Boz's dark eyes. An expressionless calm settled over the other man's face.

Damn, maybe that was a stupid move on my part. Well, shit, we do need to plan this thing a little more than we have so far, anyway.

He wasn't sure whether he was sorry or relieved when Boz agreed to the meeting. It seemed like a long time and also like no time at all until he slid into the cracked bench seat opposite Boz in a corner booth at the homey café. In contrast to the first response to his invitation, Jake saw Boz now appeared completely at ease. He smiled as Jake approached. A trace of sardonic humor lit his ebony gaze.

"Took you long enough," he quipped. "I figured maybe you'd stood me up."

Jake shook his head. "No, Snick got a little ornery about me leaving, though, and I had to talk him out of a snit."

Boz chuckled. "You and that damned dog. How'd you ever luck onto a contrary scrap of fur and meanness like him?"

"Damned if I know. Still, we suit each other, don't you think? I could say the same about you and Athena, but in that case, I'd wonder how she took up with the likes of you."

Boz's smile held a trace of melancholy. "In that case, the luck was all mine. She's an incredible dog. I can't say I deserve her, though I thank the gods she found me."

They ordered, then sipped bottles of Tecate while they waited for the meal. Jake found himself studying the other man's striking face. Boz looked more like an artist or even a monk than a detective. Jake could not see anything southwestern about the

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smaller man nor could he hear it in his accent, which was really no accent at all. He spoke almost as if English was a well-learned second language, close to textbook perfect.

“How’d you get into the cop business?” After he asked, he realized the other man might consider the question intrusive. He really did want to know, though. He sensed there was a story there.

Boz hesitated a beat. “Family tradition, mostly. My dad and three uncles were all on the force in Boston. We’re Irish...well, more the black Irish variety—probably a trace of that Spanish blood from the wreck of the armada back in sixteen-whatever. Boys in our family either went into the church or on the police force. I wasn’t cut out to be a priest, so what else could I do?”

“You’re a long way from Boston. I’d never have guessed that was your home, either. Most exiles still have the accent...sound like the Kennedys, you know?”

Boz quirked an eyebrow. “No fuckin’ way, man. I thought about going into the theater as a kid and the first thing I did was lose that accent. Never got it back and don’t plan to. I had a couple of good speech and elocution teachers in school who helped me develop a regionless speech pattern. It’s been handy at times. I’ve picked up a fair bit of Spanish the last few years, at least the border variety, and that works here. It’s not the Latin I had to study back then—parochial school, of course. Anyway, that background helped my learning curve.”

Jake found himself nodding. “Yeah, I’m getting some of that Tex-Mex or whatever, too. Almost have to if I want to communicate with half the crew these days.” He shrugged. “Don’t get me wrong because I don’t begrudge them a job. Hell, my old man was a citizen of Sweden and he married a Greek. They did become Americans once they settled here, but they were

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foreigners.”

“Swedish and Greek? That’s a hell of a mixture. How’d that ever happen?”

“Dad was a sailor...merchant marine. He was all over the world for a number of years, then decided to settle down after he met Mom when his ship landed in Greece. They were the odd couple for sure, yet it worked until he died five years ago. Raised six of us mismatched kids. Mom calls San Diego home now and the other kids are all in SoCal. I’ve just got an itchy foot, probably inherited from Dad.”

They concentrated on the meal for a few moments and then switched to the ostensible reason for the meeting.

“So what do you think we need to do to catch the thieves? Any ideas about who they might be?”

Boz’s question should not have surprised Jake. He wasn’t sure why it did. Maybe he figured the detective would take the lead here. He was flattered to be asked anyway. He hesitated, scratching his jaw.

“I’m not sure. Probably hide out at the site for a few nights and try to see what’s happening, if anything. They have to come back when nobody’s around and no work’s going on. It’d be pretty obvious, pulling wire and removing control modules and stuff, if they did it in broad daylight. I’d hate to think it’s anyone on my crew, although I guess it could be. But, hell, they’re good men, hard workers, and I’ve trusted them.”

Boz looked thoughtful. “That’s how it happens a lot of times. People can be deceptive, show one face to you, hiding the real person behind a facade. Some of them really do lead a double life, one honest and one crooked as a sidewinder. I’m thinking it’d almost take someone in the business to know what was the most

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valuable, and you said this morning that the most expensive components are disappearing along with lots of wire. Copper is up there these days on the metals markets.”

Shaking his head, Jake pondered on that. “Never had anything like this happen before on a job. This is my first as crew chief. I was assistant on two others before this one, but not the head honcho. I never heard of this kind of thievery on jobs I’ve been on, and word tends to get out. Hell, it’s hard to hide having to redo a bunch of work when stuff disappears. “

“I like your idea of going back and laying low, watching for a few hours. We could do it tonight since tomorrow’s Sunday if you’re up to it, or pick another night, tomorrow or whenever works for you. I’m never off duty, not really, when there’s a case to work. They don’t pay me by the hour.”

Jake didn’t hesitate. “It can’t get resolved too soon. Management is having fits. I know it’s costing them through the nose. The sooner we get this thing nipped, the better. I guess we aren’t quite going ninja, are we? I expect dark clothes and a quiet, unobtrusive approach would be called for.”

“I wear black a lot,” Boz admitted, “and sometimes a little cammo face paint in stakeouts. This isn’t quite like some of the drug surveillances. Close, though. Let’s go home and grab a quick nap, then say we meet at the northwest corner of the site about midnight.”

Jake readily agreed, a quiver of excitement tickling behind his belly button. He hadn’t had a real adventure for some time and this promised to be one. Although it could be completely dull and boring, a hunch told him it wouldn’t be.

“I’ll be there,” he said. “No bells.”

CHAPTER 3

Because she was used to Boz's odd hours, Athena did not fuss when he got up at eleven-thirty and dressed. Even though her eyes held a shadow of reproach at the prospect of having to stay home alone yet again, she remained curled up on her cushiony bed at the foot of his. Before he walked out, he stooped to scratch her ears and rummaged in the "dog cupboard" in the hall closet for one of her favorite treats, a new hoof chew.

"There, girl, that'll keep you occupied for a while. I'll be back before you even miss me."

He slipped quietly out the back door and walked down the alley, soft-footed as a cat in the dark. He thought about driving, however, decided walking would be less obtrusive and wouldn't take a whole lot longer. The evening air held a hint of coolness.

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Summer was definitely over.

He walked briskly once he reached the street, crossing through a corner of old town to reach the site of the new medical complex. He spotted Jake heading toward him about a block away and paused on the corner to wait for the big man.

Jake wore dark clothes, probably a newer pair of jeans and a bulky shirt. A cap covered most of his hair and he'd put some cammo stuff on his face to dull any shine.

"All set?"

Jake nodded. "Ready as I'm going to be. What's the game plan?"

"Let's go together to the front entrance, then split up. Just work our way slowly around the whole complex and plan to meet back at the super's trailer in about forty-five minutes."

Jake agreed. They crossed the quiet street together, went in through a gate Boz thought should have been locked. It wasn't. Then they headed straight for what would be the main entrance of the new complex once finished. Although most windows and doors were not yet installed, the bulk of the structure was in place. Interior walls were going in as the crews completed the wiring and plumbing, and other interior work was well underway.

They parted just inside and went off down the main corridor in opposite directions. Boz noted Jake wore athletic shoes instead of his usual work boots and the big man moved quietly, in spite of his size. *Good, he's got some smarts in that big head of his. I'm not surprised. The guy has his shit together.*

The site was quiet. No one seemed to be stirring, nor did anything else seem to be amiss. Boz slipped from one hallway to another, in and out of rooms and areas, stopping often to listen and probe with his senses. If anyone was around, he was pretty sure

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he'd pick up some hint of it.

After he'd toured a good part of the complex and started back downstairs from the second floor, Boz pushed back his sleeve to glance at the luminous face of his watch. It was about time to head out to meet Jake.

Just then, he caught a vague noise. He didn't think it was a voice—no words anyway—it really sounded more like a muffled grunt or even an animal's sound.

Something about it disturbed him. It was out of place. Not a sound made by the wind or the building itself, but the sound of some living creature. A frisson of worry skittered down his spine. Though still quiet, he moved now with greater purpose and urgency, for the appointed meeting place. He needed to know Jake was okay.

* * *

Jake grinned to himself as he headed off in the opposite direction from Boz. *This is fun. I haven't played cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians in about twenty years. By God, it's still a good game.* This game was dead serious, though, and he didn't lose sight of that fact in his pleasure.

Whoever was ripping off the company was not in it for fun. They were making a pile of illegal profit and probably wouldn't hesitate to do anything they had to in order to keep their scheme working. Even including murder if it came to that. He had no illusions about the type of people they were looking for. These were desperate and amoral criminals, used to breaking laws with impunity and getting away with it. Although he wasn't afraid, he would be cautious.

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He headed for the section that would be the testing and diagnostic center, where some very sophisticated electronic machinery was going in. That's where the latest thefts had occurred. They'd reinstalled so now there was valuable gear there to be stolen—again. By now, his eyes had adjusted well to the dark and even the little light coming through unglazed windows and open doors was enough for him to find his way. Besides, he knew these halls and rooms pretty well after days of working in this section.

The sound was so faint he could hardly call it a sound. A step? A muffled grunt, as if someone bumped into something? He wasn't sure, yet an inner sense told him it was not natural or right. He edged closer to the nearest wall and inched toward the next doorway, through which he thought the barely audible noise had come.

As he stuck his head around just far enough to see, he spotted a man's shape silhouetted against the window on the far side of the room. He opened his mouth to say, "Hold it." Before the words emerged, a blow on the back of his head dropped him to his knees.

His last thought was angry. *Damn it, I never heard anyone behind me. How...* When he grabbed at the doorjamb, his fingers found nothing to break his fall. A black vacuum swallowed him.

* * *

Jake wasn't at the meeting place. Boz checked his watch again. He was maybe five minutes ahead of time. For a split second, he debated. Wait or go looking? His concern won out. He hesitated just long enough to orient himself as he remembered the tour Jake had given him that morning. The diagnostic center was upstairs

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and to the left. That was where some of the most valuable stuff was.

Moving fast now, with less caution, he raced back into the building, up the stairs and down the corridor. When he caught a whiff of disturbed air, the scent of sweat and something else, he didn't slow down. No one was here now he was sure, but someone had been, just moments before. Not Jake; someone else. It wasn't Jake's scent.

He saw the dark blur on the floor in the doorway before he reached it, a man-shape, a big man. *Oh, God, be all right. Please be all right.* The thought surprised him only in its intensity. This investigation was his job. If the other man had been hurt or killed, he wasn't sure he could live with himself. Jake was not trained in the crazy survival tricks of a vice detective. He was too honest and open, too trusting and even naïve.

Boz dropped into a crouch, reaching to touch Jake's shoulder. From there his hand slid to the other man's neck, feeling for a pulse. It was there, strong and steady. *Okay, he's not dead or dying, at least not yet.*

Jake groaned and stirred. The big man shook his head like a poll-axed steer as he pushed himself up to a sitting position.

"Sonuvabitch! Whoever hit me packed a mean wallop. Snuck up behind me, too. I'd heard something and was trying to get a quick look through the door. I saw someone, standing there in front of the window. The next thing I knew, bam, felt like a sledgehammer bashed me from behind. Now the bastards got away. Shit."

"Are you okay?" Boz had to ask, even if it was an inane question. "Give yourself a minute before you try to get up. A concussion is nothing to mess with. Where did they hit you?"

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Jake raised a hand and ran it gingerly down the back of his head. "Here, just at the base of the skull, I think. That's the tender spot anyway. At the time it felt like a steel plate had hit the whole back of my head, like a truck had hit me."

"Well, we know someone was here. I'll call my back-up and get a fingerprint kit out here. We'll dust the room and see if we can pick up anything. And you can check to see if anything's missing. I figure we're safe to use a light now. They're gone and they know we're after them."

Jake growled an incoherent mumble of rage that finally shaped into words. "Fuckin' lousy bastards. I shoulda had eyes in the back of my head. Whoever got me didn't make a sound. I was listening, paying attention, or I thought I was. I guess I was too focused on the guy in the room, though."

Boz chuckled, relieved it hadn't been any worse. "Good thing you have a Swede's hard head."

He started to rise at the same instant Jake began to struggle to his feet. Somehow, they wound up grabbing at one another in an effort to find their balance. What happened next was completely unplanned, unexpected and unbelievable. They ended up wrapped in each other's arms, bodies straining together, as their mouths melted in a heated and urgent kiss.

Danger is the master aphrodisiac. Shit, I was not going to let this happen. Well, it's too late now. God, but it feels so good, so right, so necessary...

They broke apart only when they heard the sounds of Boz's back-up and the other cops' booted feet and muffled voices. Even though the bunch was speaking quietly enough, they still sounded very loud in the echoing depths of the unfinished building. The advance warning gave Boz and Jake enough time to turn away

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from each other, tame burgeoning erections and calm pounding hearts and gasping breath. Yet the words hung between them as if spoken, *This isn't finished yet*. The awareness triggered both dread and anticipation in Boz.

On the heels of that thought came another. *Oh, man, I'm glad they didn't sneak up on us*. Boz neither flaunted nor hid his sexual preferences. Still he was pretty sure only a few his fellow officers knew. A few more might suspect, though most of them would probably be shocked or dismayed if they found out, especially in such a way. He'd made it a rule to keep business and pleasure totally separate, in boxes as far apart as they could be. To a degree, it was the only way to survive in the cruel world of the undercover vice cop.

By the time the others reached the room, Boz had himself totally under control again. He explained the situation as tersely as possible and then directed the fingerprinting effort. He could not let the opportunity slip away, even if it would likely give them little in the way of sound leads. They went over the room carefully for prints and any other clues. The crew picked up a few things that might or might not be evidence.

Finally, there was no more to do. Boz glanced at Jake. He'd stayed patiently out of the way while the crime scene team worked, answered a few questions and now looked weary yet still quizzical when Boz met his gaze.

Boz answered the unspoken query. "Yeah, we're done here. Not much more we can do tonight anyway, what's left of it."

Jake shook his head. "I've got the mother of all headaches coming on and it's only three hours before time to come to work. I just wish I could've got my hands on one of those guys."

"We'll catch them. They'll probably be more cautious now,

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knowing we're onto them. I doubt they'll quit, though—too much easy money to tempt them... Since it's Sunday, no work today, is there?" He looked at Jake a bit more keenly, concerned by this small memory slip. "Say, you look a little rough. Shouldn't you get checked for a concussion?"

Jake clearly started to deny it, then hesitated. "No hospitals," he muttered. "I don't do horsepistols. I'm okay."

"I don't think so. Either I take you to the Urgent Care up on Telshore or you come home with me so I can keep an eye on you. Concussions are nothing to fool with, and I suspect you have one."

For a moment, he was sure the big man was going to protest or even refuse, but then his shoulders sagged a bit. "Okay, I'll let ya babysit me for the rest of the night."

CHAPTER 4

While he waited for Boz to bring his car down to the entrance of the complex, Jake realized how tired he felt and how his head pounded with every heartbeat. *Damn. That blasted bum really gave me a thump. Tomorrow—or make that today—is Sunday. I’d forgotten. I don’t forget things like that. Maybe Boz was right and I do have a concussion...* He found it hard to hold onto a thought long enough to finish it. That didn’t seem like a good sign either.

Just then, Boz pulled up at the curb. Jake managed to get into the car—a fully restored vintage Mustang. He was almost too weary and hurt to appreciate the car. He couldn’t find the words to tell Boz what a great set of wheels he had.

When they got to Boz’s home, Athena met them at the door. She gave both men a reproachful look after she sniffed Jake over

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and realized Snick was not with him. She sat down with a small whine.

Boz stooped to pet her. "I'm sorry, baby girl. Snick is home. Maybe we can go get him later. Right now we gotta make do with his pop."

Paused in the entry, Jake waited for Boz to show him where to go. He leaned a shoulder against the wall. He wished he dared sit on the small antique bench, which looked too fragile to support him.. Though it might be modern, the thing looked centuries old. What he could see of the house was neat to a fault and attractively decorated in a Spanish colonial and native southwest manner. Trust Boz to have good taste.

As Boz rose from attending to his dog, he gestured toward an arched opening to the right. "Second door on the left is the guest room. First one's the john. There's aspirin in the cabinet over the sink. You'd better take a couple for your head. If you need anything else, just holler. I have a couple of calls to make and need to get some notes down while things are fresh in my mind. I'll be checking on you every hour or so, though."

Jake couldn't even summon the will to protest. Actually, Boz's approach made sense. He managed to find the bathroom, take a leak, gulp down two aspirins and then stagger a few more steps and fall across the bed, just kicking off his shoes. He stayed dressed, and he was asleep almost before he settled onto the mattress.

It didn't seem like five minutes had passed before he awoke with a jolt. Jake shook him by the shoulder, a trace of alarm in his voice as he repeated Jake's name several times.

"Come on, man. Wake up. Don't be going into a coma on me here."

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Finally, Jake pried his eyes open and summoned the capacity to reply. “Errghhmmfff. I’m awright.”

Boz shone a flashlight into his face. “Well, your eyes respond to the light. I’m gonna bed down across the hall, but I’m a light sleeper. Expect another wake-up call or two before daylight. You ought to get out of those clothes. Can’t be comfortable sleeping that way.”

After Boz left, Jake sat up. Although it was difficult and clumsy, he managed to unfasten his jeans and slither out of them. He dropped them to the floor and then dragged his T-shirt off. After that, he crawled under the dark plaid spread and found a pillow to slip under his head before darkness closed in again.

Although he vaguely sensed when Boz came in the next couple of times to check on him, he barely awoke enough to respond in a fuzzy way. By the fourth time, the sun was up and he was awake. On impulse, he decided to play possum and see what would happen. A quirky plan began to take shape in his mind. That kiss still hung heavy in his awareness, a bit of unfinished business that demanded some answers.

He heard Boz’s soft steps, muffled by the throw rugs that padded the bedroom floor. He heard Boz say his name softly and then more loudly. He kept his eyes shut and did not stir.

“Damn it, man, what’s wrong? Wake up.” Boz’s voice held more than a trace of concern.

Then Boz reached down and caught Jake’s shoulder, shaking him, although not hard.

Quick as lightning, Jake reached up and caught the other man with both hands, gripping his upper arms tightly. Caught off balance, Boz sprawled down on top of Jake, emitting a gasp and then a woof as he scored a solid hit on Jake’s chest.

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“What the...”

Jake’s mouth muffled Boz’s startled exclamation. The detective recovered from his surprise quickly and returned Jake’s kiss with equal ardor and enthusiasm.

Boz wore only a short terry robe, loosely belted at his waist. Jake made fast work of the tie and soon had the robe open. His questing hands roved over Boz’s sleek, muscular torso, tracing every line and angle, familiarizing himself with the smaller, leaner man’s frame. Boz lost little time in returning that attention. His nimble hands charted the territory of Jake’s chest, combing through the thick mat of dark hair. He found the flat tan nipples nestled in the curls and tweaked them into hard points.

They rolled together on the bed, bodies straining for contact on as much of their surfaces as possible. Jake had been half-hard before he pulled Boz down on top of him. It took only seconds before he had a real boner. The way it felt, Boz was in the same state.

Reaching down between their twisting bodies, Jake wrapped his hand around Boz’s cock. It pulsed and twitched in his grasp, while Boz sucked in a hard breath and let it out in a hiss. “Sweet mother...”

“Tell me what you want, what you need.” Jake’s voice came out in a hoarse, muted tone, rife with urgency and hunger.

“You, us, everything,” Boz ground out. “Damn it, I wasn’t going to let this happen. It’s too fuckin’ late to back out now, though. I want to taste you, feel you ramming into my ass, and then take my turn getting your best. I want you to suck and fuck my brains out right after I do all that to you.”

Then he stopped for a moment, reared back on extended arms and looked down at Jake with a sudden concern. “How’s your

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head? Are you sure you're up to this?"

Jake laughed. "Hey, I started it didn't I? If I didn't think I was able, I'd have had more sense than that. The only head that needs attention now is the one you're about to take hold of."

"All right. You're going to pay for scaring me shitless last night when you didn't show up at the time we'd set. Until I found you—then it was as bad or worse when I did. Oh, hell, I was afraid I'd have to take that shittin' little dog of yours to raise."

Jake hesitated a minute. "Fuck. Snick. I need to go home and let him out."

Boz chuckled. "Been there and done that, right after the second time I checked on you this morning. Swiped your keys out of your pants to get in. He and Athena are out in the back yard right now having themselves a two-dog riot. He's fine. Thank the gods they're both fixed. They'd make some crazy puppies."

"Man, I think I love you! How many buds would make the time to take care of my dog? Quit fooling around then and make good on your big words."

For the next twenty minutes or so, there was nothing in Jake's awareness except the smooth strokes of Boz's hand and then the wet, clinging heat of the other man's mouth on his prick. Boz knew how to make it last...and last. Jake thought he was going to die if he didn't come, but also that he'd surely die when he did.

His tension would spiral up to the brink. Then, each time, Boz would ease off, change his rhythm or squeeze the head of Jake's cock at just the right instant to stop the climax. After a few seconds of total agony, he'd start in again. It was wonderful and terrible. It was, without a doubt, the most maddening, excruciating and intense blowjob Jake had ever survived. It felt like a miracle, almost a nightmare, but a miracle, too, all rolled into one.

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At last he did come, in an explosive ejaculation that felt as if he was coming apart from the inside out. After the last shuddering spurt, he lay limp, for the moment too spent to move.

In his position between Jake's sprawled legs, Biz rocked back on his heels. "Don't get too comfortable just yet," he warned. "I'm not through, and neither are you."

Jake recovered a lot faster than he'd thought he could. Part of that was due to Boz's skillful teasing and maybe part to his own surprising hunger. *Yeah, I do want more.* The thought came as soon as Boz flopped down beside him on the bed and took his face in both hands, looking steadily into his eyes for the space of several heartbeats.

For those moments, Boz's eyes were nothing close to opaque. Dark, yes, but lit from someplace deep inside with a tangle of fierce emotions. Desire was there, along with a trace of stark fear, the shadow of past pain, and the spark of current joy.

Jake realized he felt most of the same things. *Can this work? Will it last? Is there even any use in hoping for something beyond this day and hour?*

He couldn't answer any of those questions, at least not right now. Maybe it didn't matter. He had this hour and this day so, by God, he'd use the hell out of them. He grabbed Boz and crushed the two of them together. Within moments he was hard again, his cock thrusting into the space between Boz's thighs, bumping, tangling and fencing with Boz's equally eager prick.

"Roll over," Jake demanded. "Get your knees under you and that great ass up where I can get to it."

Boz complied. "There's lube and condoms in the night stand." His words were muffled with his face half-buried in the tangle of bedding. Jake found the tube, nearly new, and slathered most of a

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generous squeeze onto his prick, stroking the rest down the crack of Boz's ass. He poked one finger and then two into the tight waiting hole. Boz clenched on them, made a sound half between a whimper and a moan.

"Don't worry, I'm ready. Fuck me."

Jake did. He'd intended to take it slow and easy this first time. He found he couldn't. As soon as his initial thrust took him past the outer ring of muscle, he was lost, humping away as urgently as he ever had, driving, seeking, and claiming. Even if he came too soon, it was good—better than good—outstanding to fantastic. How he could do it twice so quickly he wasn't sure. Oh, man, though, what a ride. Even thought he knew the next time he'd take longer to get up again, that was okay. It was Boz's turn now anyway, and Jake hoped he could give as good as he'd received.

* * *

Boz collapsed onto the bed. His trembling legs refused to hold him up any longer. He felt Jake pull free with a momentary pang of loss when the connection ended. That wasn't good—this was supposed to be about defusing the heat between them, having a good time. Nothing more or deeper or—God forbid—emotional. *But it was. Shit. It really was.*

He lay still a long moment before he felt Jake's urgent hands grasp him by his hips to flip him onto his back. The big man managed the task effortlessly. Those sculpted muscles were for real, the result of hard work and an active life, not the over-developed for-show physique of a body builder.

Boz worked to stay fit because some of his days were very physical. Many were not, though, so most days he ran five miles,

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and the rest he tried to spend an hour or two at the gym. He couldn't afford to have his body let him down at a critical point. Now that was paying off in another way.

Jake's powerful, work-roughened hands roved over Boz's body, shaping him like molten clay. Every touch woke nerve endings and sent flickers of electric heat and hunger dancing through his system. His cock stood stiff, quivering with urgency, but Jake took his time shifting to that spot.

Finally, *finally*. When Boz felt a big hand close around his shaft, he had to fight the urge to come at that very instant. Jake, however, wasn't going to let it happen too fast. Although he might lack some of Boz's finesse, he seemed to have learned a trick or two. Boz found he could be teased as well as he could tease. There were long moments of blissful agony before Jake finally settled at his side and bent forward to slide his lips over the head of Boz's cock.

Oh, man. Oh, my gods, now I know what awesome feels like.

Once Jake started sucking, Boz knew it would be over fast. For the duration, time had no meaning. It might have been seconds or hours. When his hips bucked off the bed, Jake held him down. Heat, wetness, pressure and tension ratcheted to a shimmering tautness.

When the dam finally broke, he exploded into Jake's mouth so hard he feared the other man might choke. Jake didn't; he didn't pull back or spit or gag or flinch either. He didn't lift his head until the final spurt subsided.

"It ain't over till it's over, you know," Jake reminded him. "I'll give you about five to get it together, get it up, and put me where you want me."

"Is that weeks, hours or minutes?" Although at the moment he

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felt as wrung out as a limp old washrag, Boz would give it his best shot. He'd promised and he had his honor to uphold. With Jake watching him while wearing nothing save a crooked come-on grin, it proved easier than he had expected.

Boz rolled off the mattress and onto his feet, then circled to stand at the foot of the bed, rolling a half dozen different scenarios through his mind. He stroked himself lazily, helping his eyes and imagination work their magic.

Jake made things easy. He flipped over and dropped his legs off the bed, knees to the floor. Even if the position put him a little low, it gave Boz a great view of the big man's fantastic muscular ass. Boz could still picture the sight he'd taken in the evening they'd met as Jake clipped a leash on Snick and started away. Stooping had tightened faded, butter-soft jeans across those muscled cheeks and walking moved them in totally enticing ways. Boz had gone hard in seconds, just from looking. Now that ass was all his... *Life doesn't get any better than this!*

He stepped closer, reached and rubbed down Jake's sides from just below the ribs to the slight widening of his lean hips. "You're a little low," he said. "How about you get up and stand, just leaning over onto the bed?"

Jake complied at once, a tiny tremor in his muscles betraying his eagerness and maybe anxiety. "I normally limit things to a BJ," he said, voice stifled by the bedding. "This time is different. You let me do you, and I want to make it totally even, equal, shared. It's not quite virgin territory, but close. I wish you *could* be first. It would be a lot better than the first time really was. I was pretty young at the time, scared, not as big as I am now..."

His words trailed away as Boz found the lube, squirted a thin trail down the crack of Jake's ass and began to rub it around,

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easing into the big man's anus with first one finger and then two, spreading the slickness and giving him time to adjust and accept.

Then, taking his cock in one hand, Boz rubbed it along the same path, finally testing and easing in, slowly, smoothly, no jab or thrust, just a slippery slide past the first tight ring and then gradually deeper. Jake sighed out a heavy breath and gasped in another. He clutched and fisted handfuls of the bedspread, then shifted his feet to brace himself better, digging his toes into the carpet. Boz felt every motion, watching closely for any signs of distress.

"You okay here?"

"Oh, yeah, better than okay. Come on. I won't break or tear or shatter. Fuck me like you mean it."

Boz did. Afterwards they both slept a while, lying close together with Boz's back to Jake's front. It felt good, right and almost too comfortable.

The rest of the day slipped past quickly. After the nap, they got up, made a fast run to the grocery store, barbequed a couple of steaks and tended to the dogs. Boz tried not to think about the ramifications of how easy they were together, how smoothly they got along.

It's almost too effing scary to contemplate, but damn if it doesn't feel good.

CHAPTER 5

“Boss, I gotta talk to you.”

Two days had passed since the night of their stakeout. Boz had been busy, Jake knew. Still he missed the other man more than he cared to admit.

Jake turned to the speaker, recognized the man as Jorge Castillo, one of his best journeymen. They’d worked together on a couple of jobs in Texas, and Jake respected the other man’s skill and integrity. Right now, the Latino wore a worried frown, and his posture almost yelled distress.

“What’s the problem, Jorge? We haven’t lost any more equipment, have we?”

The other man shook his head. “No, I think not anyway. I maybe know where some of it went, though. I hate so bad to say

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this. Felipe is my nephew, and I vouched for him, my kid sister's boy. He came out from California and needed a job he said. So I bring him in as a helper." The smaller man shook his head. "Big mistake I'm afraid."

"Are you sure?" The news shook Jake. He had thought the boy a good worker, too, and had never suspected he might be involved in the thefts. He certainly didn't look like a gangbanger or a hood. Wore his hair neatly cut and no do-rag, baggy pants and other traditional signs. He did have a couple of odd tats, although a lot of the young guys did, many who had no gang connections at all.

Jorge shrugged. "No, only that I overhear some things he say on his cell phone. I do not know who, but the things he say, about how they'd get more soon. How they had to be careful now because the law was checking things and stuff. He was in the room we let him use, my wife and I, in our house. I was outside in the yard yesterday evening working in the flowers under his window. I don't think he knew I was there. Now I am very worried and very scared. My sister, it will break her heart if he is going wrong, and the company will not trust me anymore, either."

Damn. Shit. Jake let his breath out slowly. "Let me do some checking, Jorge. Don't say anything to anyone yet. Yeah, it's true the local cops are keeping an eye on the place and following up on some leads. Maybe your nephew was talking about something else entirely. I'll look into it, so just go on and work like normal. The job still has to be done and we're a little behind schedule with all the troubles."

With a trace of relief sliding over his face, Jorge nodded. "All right. I just had to tell you. It was weighing on me like an overloaded backpack, dragging me down, worrying about it. The rumor is the cops almost caught some guys here the other night,

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over the weekend... I know nothing about that and I tell my co-workers it is just a rumor. We still gotta work, like you say.”

Jake rested his hand on the other man’s shoulder for a moment. “Thanks for telling me Jorge. I’m going to hope it isn’t your nephew, too. If it is, he isn’t doing it alone. Several people are involved...have to be. We’ll get them. It may take a little time, but we’ll get them.”

As Jorge turned and ambled off, Jake’s phone buzzed and he checked to see who was calling. *Boz*. He answered it on the second ring.

“Got a match on one set of prints. There’s a warrant on the guy out of California, drug related, and not the first time he’s been in trouble. Even if he’s working on site, which would be a reason for the prints to be there legit, the warrant’s enough to pick him up. Two officers will be there for him at the end of the shift if not sooner. Could be if he’s guilty, he’ll spill the beans on the rest.”

Jake hesitated, torn between relief and dismay. “Got a name on the guy?”

“He uses several, apparently. He’s on the rolls here as Felipe Delgado. Age twenty-three. From the records the super had, he’s only been on this job about thirty days.”

Nodding, Jake started putting things together. “I just talked to his uncle—or I should say he talked to me. He overheard a phone conversation, just his nephew’s part of it, but it got him worried enough to come tell me. Damn, Jorge is a good man. I hate to see this. The kid seemed like a good worker, too.”

“Can you identify this Felipe?”

“Oh, yeah, I know everybody on my crew. “

“I’ll be down there in about half an hour. Two uniforms will be there not long after that. It’ll be best if we can take him quietly.”

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“Okay. I’ll meet you at the super’s office. I think I can have Felipe there, too.”

Jake arrived at the office before Boz showed up. Jorge and Felipe turned up at almost the same time Boz did. When the two uniformed officers rounded the corner into view, Jake saw Felipe tense, but he didn’t run. In seconds, he’d schooled his face into a stoic mask. Jorge’s glances shifted quickly back and forth among them all, worry tightening his round, pleasant face. He knew what was going to happen and he dreaded it. To be honest, Jake did as well.

The cops bracketed Felipe smoothly, then reached to take him by both arms. One showed him the warrant and spoke the chilling words, “You’re under arrest.”

The young man’s shoulders drooped. He shook his head, just a slow side to side, the gesture eloquent of defeat.

Boz stepped up then. “If you’ll cooperate with us on details about the thefts from the site here, we might be able to make things a little easier for you. Even though I don’t think we can lose that California warrant, at least there may not be one from New Mexico to add to it.”

Jorge spoke a few quick terse words in Spanish. Even though it was rapid-fire and in the slurred border dialect, Jake got the gist of it. Felipe would get no help from his uncle if he didn’t cooperate, quickly and totally. The youth cut his gaze first to his uncle and then back to Jake and Boz.

“I’ll tell you what I know,” he said. “The first thing is I should not have gotten involved. I’m thinking honest money is better and no one gets hurt. I wish I could start over again... I’ll tell you what I know, though. Maybe it’ll help end this.”

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Later that evening, when Jake got home, he headed off to the dog park almost as soon as he got to the apartment. He wasn't sure if Boz would be there. Even if he hoped, he also suspected the detective was up to his eyeballs sorting out the case, which had likely cracked wide open with Felipe's confession. He told himself he wouldn't be disappointed if they didn't see each other this evening, even if Snick would miss the hell out of Athena.

Although Snick was glad to run as always, Jake could tell he was looking for his lean and lofty friend. After a few minutes of racing around in dizzy circles the small dog settled down to a slower circuit of the park, sniffing and peeing every few steps.

Jake shook his head, laughing at his pet's antics. "Yeah, kid, you're gonna make sure there's no question you were here, right? You're leaving your mark on every blade of grass and fence post and..."

Snick must have heard or smelled the first clue. He skidded to a stop, then went racing across the park to the gate Boz and Athena usually used. Sure enough, there they came. With a bit more dignity than Snick, yet close to the same eager joy, Jake headed that way, too.

"I wasn't sure you'd be home in time to come down tonight," Jake greeted them, as Boz brought Athena through the gate and unclipped her leash.

Boz grinned. "Almost didn't, but I've got most of my stuff done—I can finish the reports tonight or tomorrow. Felipe sang like a prize canary. We have names and leads enough to break this ring wide open. I don't think you'll be losing any more wire or components, at least not through these guys. The evening shift is

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picking some of them up as we speak and the rest are in Mexico. Not sure what we'll be able to do about them. At least they won't have their local minions stealing for them here anyway."

One question was bothering Jake enough he had to ask. "Jorge wasn't implicated, was he?"

"No way. In fact, I'm about ready to put him in for a medal. Even if we'd have broken the case in another day or two, he made it faster and easier, coming to you the way he did. Other than your bump on the head, this one has gone down pretty smooth."

Jake watched the dogs frolic for a moment, then turned back to Boz. "The carnies and circus folks have a saying, 'I love ya, honey, but the season's over.' That doesn't quite apply here. The case closed, though, so what else is there besides the dog park? What I mean is, was Sunday a fluke or is there something here we need to explore some more?"

For a few seconds, Boz looked everywhere except at Jake, took a step away to lean against the fence, then propped his elbows on the pipe running along the top of the chain link. Finally, he met Jake's gaze, his expression sober and intent. "How much longer does this job run, building the med center? I heard it was due for the grand opening in December. Will your crew's work be over before then?"

"We'll be on the job until the last, bringing all the equipment on line and standing by while the medical people test things. I don't expect to move on to a new job until the first of the year."

Boz nodded. "Good. Where all does Merritt Brothers operate?"

"Mostly in the southwest, Texas to California, once in a while up to Colorado or Utah, maybe Nevada. Most of the jobs the last several years have been right here along the border—El Paso, Tucson, San Diego—that area. I expect the next job I'm on will be

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in the same region.”

Boz hesitated a minute, as if gathering his thoughts or maybe his courage. “Did you ever consider establishing a base somewhere? Maybe investing in a place you could call home and fix up over a few years? Always have a place to come back to?”

The questions made Jake pause, wondering how Boz had stumbled onto his dim dream that never seemed to work out. “Yeah, I’ve thought about it more than once, but it just never quite jelled. Still, the idea feels good, sounds good. I’m getting damn sick of apartments and living out of my truck.”

Boz’s intent gaze slid away for a moment. “Well, Las Cruces is a decent enough town, big enough without being too big. Lots of older homes selling at pretty reasonable prices. It might be something we could look into together between now and the end of the year. Our spending more time together would sure make a couple of dogs happy.”

With a tilt of his head, he indicated the unlikely pair of canine lovers, who were checking the perimeter together. Athena seemed to slow her pace so Snick only had to take three or four steps for each one of hers. When they slowed more to turn a corner, she bent down and nuzzled him. He reared up on his hind legs and licked her face. Despite a somewhat pained expression as if she was thinking, *Aw, man, not out here in public*, she waited patiently until he stopped.

Jake had to laugh. “I can see that. They won’t be the least bit unhappy if we spend more time together so they can, too. To tell the truth, I won’t either.”

Boz grinned. “I was kind of hoping you’d feel that way. It wouldn’t be a hardship to me at all if you were to let that apartment go and take over the extra bedroom in my place for the time being.

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I think there's room in my fridge for your brand of beer and I know the yard is big enough for two dogs with some space left over to grill a steak now and then and maybe even watch a sunset or two."

Jake clapped him on the shoulder. "I think this whole thing calls for some kind of a celebration—the case is almost wrapped up and it looks like a new partnership might be in the works. Let's take our fur kids home—to your place—and see what we can scare up for the four of us to eat."

"And after that, we could watch the tube or listen to some music or maybe just make an early night of it."

"I like the way you think. It looks to me like the possibilities are pretty near limitless if we put our heads together and take a cue from our dogs' philosophy."

The dogs came running at the first whistles. Both of them wagged their tails with an excess of enthusiasm when their masters started off together instead of in opposite directions.

Things were working out just like Snick had hoped they would.

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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