

**CANINE CUPIDS**

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**The Maltese Terror, Copyright © February 2017**

**A New Leash on Live, Copyright © February 2017**

**Rescued by Love, Copyright © February 2017**

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## Chapter One

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

After what felt like a ten-mile hike, Nick reached the baggage area. His spirits lifted when he saw his luggage had made it. He grabbed the familiar bag as the carousel rumbled by. Then he remembered he had a second bag to snatch, the one with Cedric's things. Reaching with a mumbled apology around an aristocratic-looking, white-haired gentleman, he stretched and clutched, snaring a corner of the bag. It almost jerked free of his grip, but he held on, finally lifting it clear.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After pondering a moment, Nick accepted the inevitable. "All right, I'll take the Expedition."

At least a lot attendant brought the vehicle to the nearest door and helped him load his gear. Even so, dusk was falling by the time he pulled out into traffic to leave the airport. A few flakes of snow drifted down onto the windshield. From the map he'd picked up, he could see the airport sat way out of town. He'd have to haul ass once he reached the freeway if he was going to be on time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \* \*

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

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

She'd been born right here in this room, one of eight pups, the last litter his old bitch, Blue Blazes, had produced. One of the best stock dogs he'd ever had, Chey was also the best companion a rancher could ask for. A damn sight more faithful and trustworthy than any woman he'd ever known, for sure, and most men as well.

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

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

"Storm."

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

Caleb exhaled a long breath. He recognized the gravelly voice of Sandy Kuntz, the regular night dispatcher at the Adams County Sheriff's Department substation. He knew Sandy wouldn't call if it wasn't critical. Still, he had to give her a hard time. That was their long-term tradition.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The old truck started hard but, after a few tries, the big V-8 coughed and spluttered into a roaring growl. Caleb eased the Dodge in a wide circle and then headed down the lane to the gravel road at the foot of the hill. This was not how he'd planned to spend the evening, but people had died stranded overnight in blizzards. He couldn't let that happen to a fellow human, no matter how it put him out.

## Chapter Two

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

Recalling stories about carbon monoxide poisoning, he'd shut off the motor. Without the heater blasting into the vehicle, it didn't take long for cold to settle in. Nick dug his ski parka out of his carry-on and struggled into it. Then he took Cedric out of the carrier. The dog came willingly, wiggling all over. Nick tucked the warm, little body inside the parka with him. At least part of him would be warm and the dog would be well protected.

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

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

Time passed slowly. Nick dozed briefly only to wake up when Cedric squirmed, seeking a less confining position. "Hold on there, buddy; I'm giving you all the space I can." He tucked his hand under the furry bottom, shifting the dog, but keeping him

close. He felt a sudden surge of gratitude that events had forced him to bring his small partner along. Cedric's company provided a real boost now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nick stuffed Cedric back into the carrier and then grabbed his bag and the dog's things. Apparently seeing him struggle, juggling three items, the stranger grabbed Nick's bag, the biggest one. He tossed it into the jump seat area in the back of the king cab. Then it seemed he saw the puke-green carrier.

"What's that? You aren't traveling with a cat, are you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Want to know what happens next?

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