

The Armadillo Whisperer - Murder Behind Bars

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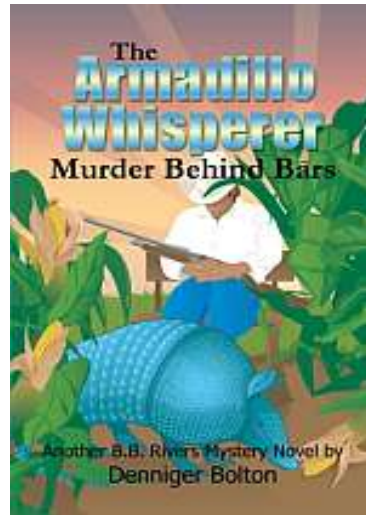
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Story Summary: B.B. is back in this hilarious action-packed sequel. He's trying hard to be a model stay-at-home dad, but a group of mercenary soldiers posing as guards in a Colorado prison are hot on his tail!



Chapter One

“A fool and his money can throw one hell of a party.”

Sign at El Arroyo Restaurant

My pointy-toed reptilian hide cowboy boots were on my desk. My feet were in them. My stomach was working on digesting breakfast, a cheese

omelet, whole wheat toast and what we born again vegetarians call fakin' bacon. My brain was engaged not with the pressing business of getting my fledgling private detective agency off the ground, but rather on my honeymoon a couple of months earlier.

My daydream dealt with gunning the *Vespa* motor scooter until it whined and shuddered in pain. I could still feel Patricia's warm sensuous body clinging tightly to my back. Her perfect thighs clamped my sides as we attempted the hill one more time. I was reasonably certain we wouldn't make it since we attempted the cobble-stoned hill four times in as many days. Four times in as many days we got off and pushed that damned motor scooter the rest of the way up to *El Jardin*.

San Miguel de Allende, a quaint albeit touristy *colonia* in the Mexican State of Guanajuato, is perched on the side of a mountain a couple hundred kilos north of Mexico City. It's a haven for Americans, Euros, artists and film makers looking for authentic Mex. It's where Lucinda Tanner, a.k.a. Auntie Loo, a client and friend, has her art studio. She allowed Patricia and me the use of her studio apartment for our honeymoon.

The timing of our post nuptial festivities could not have been better. Once in every generation in generally warm and sunny Austin, we catch a serious blast of winter sinking all the way down from the Artic to Austin. During this past February, the month we Central Texans usually think of as pre-spring, we were first deluged non-stop with rains of biblical proportions; creeks, streams, rivers, lakes and stock tanks were overflowing.

Then came the cold snap – a month of rain morphed into a night of sleet. The following morning someone (we always blame it on Troy Kimmel, our local know it all weatherman) left the door to the freezer open. The bridges glazed over, ice heavy tree limbs ripped from their trunks, and came crashing to earth. Then we got a foot of snow. Nothing new in Upstate New York, just an everyday occurrence in Fargo, North Dakota, but Austin's a town that only sees snow plows on Christmas vacation in Ruidoso, New Mexico. We have never had a sale on tire chains. I guess what I'm saying is we don't know about *Snow Days* around here.

The Blue Norther that hit Austin, petered out before sinking south below the Tropic of Capricorn, lacking a couple of hundred clicks from reaching San Miguel. Patricia and I caught the whole thing on the TV in the back room at *Casa Mex* while eating fresh cooked tortilla chips with jalapeno salsa and tossing *Negro Modelos*. As we watched Troy trying to explain what a snow bank was and reassuring the viewers that our pickup trucks were indeed under all that white stuff, I wondered how Mom was handling chores at the ranch in Blanco – tossing out hay to the cattle, slopping the chickens, cracking the ice in the water troughs, chores I'd probably be doing if I weren't in San Miguel. Oh, the guilt.

While Central Texas was freezing its collective ass off, in La Colonia de San Miguel we enjoyed cool clear spring mornings and warm balmy afternoons. Evenings were typical of desert locales, as the sun slowly sank in the west, it started cooling off.

Our wedding took place in August, but Patricia and I agreed to postpone our honeymoon until after I got the agency up and going. First things first. She was thinking we ought to earn the money to pay for the honeymoon (i.e. vacation) rather than start out our new marriage with a load of debt. She was leaning toward a cruise in the Caribbean later in the spring. I thought a pack trip to the mountains of New Mexico or Colorado to be the ticket. My idea was cheaper and something we could do without maxing out the Visa card. She thought my idea sounded more like camping out than the pampered luxury of a Princess Cruise to the Virgin Islands. And as always she was correctamundo.

When Lucinda Tanner, my first and only client, made us an offer we could not refuse – namely, the use of her studio apartment (she was doing an art show in Taos followed by a jaunt to Paris, and wouldn't be using it for at least a month) – our plans crystallized. Patricia had a bunch of vacation time built up at the magazine where she worked, and since we slid on by the optimum window time-wise for my idea, missing Autumn in the mountains, I figured saving our get-out-of-the-state-of-Texas-before-we-all-go-up-in-flames time for Summer, when we really needed a reprieve from the inevitable 100-degree heat.

However, San Miguel did have mountains, was cheap, was a perfect climate, the apartment was free, it proved to be luxurious, and best of all wasn't anything like work.

“Now, you know Babe, if we were riding Too Tall we wouldn't be sweating our balls and various parts of our anatomy off, pushing this damn

thing up this damn hill,” I gasped for air as I fought both the gravity of the hill and the altitude. I felt obligated to contribute the vast majority of the shove-it-up-the-hill effort, since Patricia was pregnant and I was 6’ 4”, 240 to 250 pounds and she was 5’2”, 105. The temperature was about seventy but sweat poured freely.

“I wonder what those burritos would think if they saw your horse? Probably think he was some sort of equine god.” Patricia pushed the motor scooter from the rear as I wrestled the handlebars. A group of Mexicano fathers and sons herding a dozen mini-donkeys (she called them burritos which I suspected was a rare politico incorrecto statement for her) passed us on the way down the hill. All turned for a free peek at Patricia’s fine ass as we went by. Someone whistled. I ignored it. See, I can control my temper.

Patricia was showing some tummy. I was showing some tummy as well, but figured in my case, it was the mucho botes de Cervezas Mexicanas and chiles relleno that were forcing me to keep relocating that metal thingy on the belt buckle to the next notch.

We flat had a ball down there. Up at the butt crack of ten o’clock. Cranking up La Vespa and careening down the first hill as fast as we dare go on the bumpy, uneven cobble stoned calle, my legs flared to the sides for balance. Patricia’s legs clamped against my hips, flying out of control as we hit the bottom hard and careened up the second hill at the top of which lies *El Jardin* and our favorite outdoor restaurant.

After a breakfast of eggs, tortillas, homemade salsa, fried potatoes and onions, with coffee and raw Mexican cream and fresh papaya juice, our routine was to walk or scoot the town, shopping the farmer's markets for fresh-cut callalilies, fruit and veggies for the evening meal. I insisted Patricia carry the flowers because with her suntanned good looks she was a walking Diego Rivera painting, which left me to muscle the produce. I figured if she looked like Frida without the unibrow, I had to come off as a cowboy version of Andy Warhol on steroids. But I didn't give a shit. I never really cared much if I were wealthy or broke, but I had to admit, the richness of our honeymoon threatened to make a Republican out of me. But then again, if I joined the Silly Party, my parents would never forgive me.

After our morning shopping spree, it was up the hill to the studio apartment to make love. Later in the day we would search out gifts for friends and relatives from the mercados. Both Patricia and I were raised to believe in the American tradition of carrying home presents for each and every friend and relative each and every time we left town. What was that all about?

After our afternoon outing we climbed back up the hill to make love, after which it became our routine to cab it out to Tobaoda, (too far to walk, too dangerous traffic-wise to take the scooter) San Miguel's foremost swimming hole, a huge clear blue pool surrounded by massive palm trees and beautifully landscaped lawn. Later, it was back to the studio for more love-making, or as the locals call it, *siesta*. We took side trips to view the monarch butterflies which homed close by on their migration to Mexico, and church ruins and bull fights

(which Patricia walked on) and to *El Instituto de Art*. Artists at work in an educational setting. Lucinda taught classes there. And there was a short bus ride away to the village of *Delores*, packed with potters, creating *talavera* plates and colorful Mexican tile.

It was Patricia's and my first and only vacation, and even though we had known each other intimately, off and on for years, making love half a dozen times a day seemed like the natural thing to do at the time.

Looking out my second story office window, feet as I mentioned, on my desk, I thought about the woman I adored, black curly hair, petite but stacked bod, and watched the typical 6th Street a.m. crowd below. Some were office types looking for a mocha frappuccino or maybe tofu migas, others were revelers still at it from the night before. In Austin it was not so easy telling the difference. But I knew The Street, having a year's worth of experience as a bouncer and rodeo cowboy under my belt.

The Bubbamobile, my Ford F-350 diesel pickup with the oversized dually tires, looking like a beluga whale with a cellulite condition, was parked on the sidewalk directly below my window in front of *Kickers* Saloon, the bar where I had worked, not so very long ago, when I became Austin's newest private eye.

Cops did not mess with Bubba since Jimmy Don told them it was there for color, décor for *Kickers*, something like a two-sided sandwich board advertisement, only bigger. The only downside to my free parking place (which if you have been anywhere near 6th Street in Austin you know that "free" and

“parking” are just not used in the same sentence) was having to affix a metallic *Kickers* metallic sign on each door and daily removing the beer cans that were inevitably tossed in the bed. But there was always the aluminum recycling money to be made.

Jimmy Don owned the whole block, which included the bar, a rodeo arena out back, and a once-empty, tiny two-room storage facility upstairs, which was now the office of -

B. B. RIVERS INVESTIGATIONS

A skinny set of stairs led up, or down, depending on whether one were coming or going, to or from, my new office. It was Friday and with all the day dreaming and such, I really hadn't accomplished a damn thing all week. As a newly married man, things had changed. Patricia filled my once, “*so what shall I do today, will it be a movie, or perhaps a sporting event weekends*” with “*Billy, would you please take out the trash and while you're at it take the old newspapers and empty Shiner bottles to the recycling center, and on the way back, swing by Whole Foods Market and get us some organic lettuce and tomatoes and...*”

Even though the office was not bringing in greenbacks, it did offer respite from honey-do-induced activity. We had been scouring the papers for a house, which for me was right up there on the boring meter with shopping for a new spring outfit. A new house also meant the chores would really become all

the more meaningful. We'd be going to the *Natural Gardener* for trees to plant and *Home Depot* for decks to build. I knew for instance, that whatever roof the structure came with, would not cut it, and thus *had* to go. If there were a St. Augustine lawn, we would need to install buffalo or zoysia. Patricia loved my friend Max's restored mansion. Fortunately, we could not afford even a fixer-upper (i.e. – lots and lots of chores) in his neighborhood.

“I got us some donuts.” Donna had come in unnoticed by this ace private detective and if it had not been for the secure lid Starbucks puts on their lattes, I'd be looking for a roll of paper towels. Donna was my Gal Friday. She was not the buxom blond I had envisioned fetching me donuts, not the stunning creature one associates with the truly hip private detective agency. Oh, she was buxom all right. Very much so. And yes, she was blond, although with dark roots. Fact was, she weighed in at about 275.

Donna had been the Investigations Department secretary when I worked a short but happily lucrative engagement at Bergstrom Investigations as a private investigator. When the powers-that-be at Bergstrom shut down the investigations department, I picked her up. Not in the literal sense. I can jump from a horse and wrestle a steer to the ground in ten seconds, but no way was I going to lift that girl off the ground. Especially not since the energy zap of my honeymoon siestas. After two months of wedded bliss, I was just now sitting up and eating solid food, for christ sakes.

Donna and I were getting along quite well. There wasn't a lot of work to interfere with our conversations. I wasn't tempted to flirt with the lass so there

wasn't the extraneous bullshit that ruins so many a workplace relationship. She made a good donut run, knew the investigations biz inside and out, and I was not the dude to try and change her.

Our ex-boss at Bergstrom, Richard A. Hollers tipped the scales at 400 donut induced pounds. I tried to imagine what it might be like to have an additional 150 to 200 pounds on my 6' 4". Not good.

She saw my concern. "Low cal?" She extracted a donut and plopped the bag on my desk. I selected a low calorie chocolate fudge studded with M&Ms.

After cracking the five-year old *Hippie Hollow* murder case, I collected my pay from Bergstrom, to which they added a decent bonus. The assignment involved finding out who murdered two teenagers at *Hippie Hollow*, a park on the East Shore of Lake Travis outside Austin, and bringing the killer James Spivey, a.k.a. El Jaguar, to justice (two 9 mm bullets side by side in the forehead spelled justice NRA style). On that same job, I brought the killer of the rap singer Iced Chai to justice (same dead killer, same two slugs in the forehead). I wondered how much that worked out per slug?

On top of Bergstrom's money I got a wallet choking reward from the wealthy, socialite Lucinda Tanner, who had hired Bergstrom and therefore had, in actuality, hired me. It was Lucinda's studio apartment that Patricia and I had inhabited on our honeymoon in Mexico.

Additionally, the Iced Chai Foundation of New Orleans had offered a reward for information leading to the arrest of the person or persons who had hired the assassin and/or who had murdered their fearless leader, the rap star,

Iced Chai. Since I had both discovered the hirer, one Reverend Arvin Tanner, and had discovered and dispatched to hell, the hired gun, the same James Spivey-El Jaguar, the Chai Foundation had cut me a check for an amount considered obscene by everyone save pro athletes and movie stars.

The aforementioned check was supposedly made out, signed and was waiting for me to retrieve. Angel Chai, Iced Chai's daughter, insisted I come to New Orleans to pick it up in person.

I know, one should not expect to make as much as I had from one measly case, but it did seem like a decent private investigator, who happened to be in the right place at the right time, with a loaded firearm, could do well in Austin. Completing the collection part of the job required merely a quick hop, an hour and change, over to New Orleans. So, that's no big deal. I've never much cared for *The City That Care Forgot*, and figured I'd fly in, pick up the check and fly back out the same day. And if it was no big deal, why ain't I done it already?

Angel Chai.