



Stilettoes and Outlaws

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Category: Romance, Action, Suspense

Description: My name is Gemma Stone and I've been a Maricopa County Sheriff's Deputy for five years and nothing has prepared me for the return of the wild, wild West. A bloodthirsty outlaw gang straight out of the 1850's is rustling cattle, robbing trains and killing people. These two-legged varmints are also linked to a dangerous enemy from my parents' past who is determined to destroy our family.

My personal life got even more complicated. Off duty, I'm a ballroom dancer and my dad has always been supportive of my dancing, but to discover the reason why was jaw dropping. What other secrets was he hiding?

Dealing with hyperactive chickens blowing things up, an overprotective Brahma bull and Grandpa Reynolds suddenly parking his RV in our pasture makes me think Armageddon is coming to Arizona.

Law enforcement isn't for the fainthearted. Are you crazy enough to enter my world?

Author's note: I was a 9-1-1 dispatcher for way too many years and this novella contains some of the wilder incidents that occurred.

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Prologue

My name is Gemma Stone and I've been a Maricopa County Sheriff's Deputy for five years. Why did I become a cop? Genetics, tradition, and the armed robbery I walked in on when I was sixteen.

After my father and five brothers were discharged from the Marines, they all went into law enforcement. My mother had been an Army sniper until pregnancy forced a career change. She now flies a rescue chopper for the Arizona Department of Public Safety.

I work out of District Three, which includes Sun City, eight unincorporated towns with small populations, Lake Pleasant, and lots of desert. Fifteen deputies cover 1600 square miles. District Three is always understaffed and our calls for service are incredibly high. If you get in trouble, you are pretty much on your own.

My personal life is complicated. Off duty, I'm a ballroom dancer. Everyone thinks I'm nuts, but I love competitive dancing. My Dad has always been supportive of my dancing, but to discover the reason why was jaw-dropping. What other secrets is he hiding?

Detective Sergeant Dante Delgado, the love of my life, is tracking down a group of trigger-happy cattle rustlers who have murdered five ranchers and left a trail of destruction behind them. Am I worried? You betcha.

To add to my stress level, a dangerous enemy from my parents' past has returned and is determined to destroy them, our family and the Alpha Dogs. I knew my parents had

some skeletons in their closet, but it doesn't explain why Grandpa Reynolds suddenly parked his RV in our pasture and Dad isn't making him leave.

Is Armageddon coming to Arizona?

Chapter One

Once a week our entire family gathers for breakfast at my parents' house. If your ass isn't in a chair by 7 a.m., you better have a damn good reason. Like you're in the middle of a shootout or dead.

It was my turn to cook, and I was going to make my famous chocolate chip waffles. Since the Sheriff's Department was still using the Alpha Dogs training center as a substation, I thought I could come a bit early, whip up my waffle batter, then run over to the substation and get some paperwork done.

Dante's current homicide cases had him dealing with piles of reports he needed to read through. He was hoping to find a clue that would lead him to the location of the murderous rustlers who called themselves the Cochise Cowboys. Since he was considered family now, his attendance was mandatory too.

We walked into the kitchen and stopped dead. Who in the hell was playing bump and grind music at this time of the morning? Was Grandpa Reynolds messin' with Dad again?

"I thought your parents liked country western music?" Dante put a hand on his service weapon.

"They do." I opened the door to the living room and froze in stunned horror. My father, wearing nothing but black silk boxers with red hearts on them, gyrated around my mother.

Mom's rapt attention was focused on Dad. Her long blue-tee shirt with a picture of a snarling Chihuahua on the front wasn't the least bit romantic. It had been a gag gift from me for Mother's Day.

Holy cow! The sensuous expression on Dad's face was a panty melter. His pelvic thrusts rivaled Thunder Down Under and the Chippendales dancers.

Dante let out a low whistle.

Dad spun to face us and bristled. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm cooking breakfast, remember?" I waved my hand around. "The better question is where did you learn to dance like that?"

"Your father was a Chippendales dancer before he joined the Marines," Mom answered in amusement.

My jaw dropped. Was Mom joking? She didn't act like it. It was more like she was proud of the fact. "Why did you get a job with the Chippendales, Dad?"

"I wanted to buy a cutting horse, and I wasn't winning enough money at bull riding. The pay for dancing was damn good, and it was a lot of fun."

Mom interjected, "And there were so many women throwing themselves at your father, that he gave Casanova a run for his money."

"I was seventeen and I enjoyed the attention," Dad said without a trace of guilt.

"Dancers have to be twenty-one," Dante interposed.

Dad rubbed his jaw. "I had fake ID, and my beard made me look older."

Call me thunderstruck. My dad had been a playboy at seventeen. “Why all the secrecy?”

Dad grimaced. “I have a reputation to maintain.”

“But Dad, men dance all the time. If anyone brings it up, just tell them you were undercover. A few people might think Dante is a wuss because he dances competitively, but he doesn’t let it bother him. His machismo makes him a better dancer.”

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Dante kissed my knuckles. “Thank you,querida.”

“In the 1990s any man who admitted he was a stripper would have been booted out of the Marines,” Dad retorted.

My curiosity got the better of me. “How long were you a dancer?”

“Eight months. Grandad found out and he dragged me down to the Marine recruiting office the day I turned eighteen.”

Dante asked, “Who ratted you out?”

“One of the ladies at our church,” Dad grumbled.

I snickered. “Bet she wasn’t getting any.”

Mom ran her hand down Dad’s muscular chest. “Now this is all mine, and I love his lap dances.”

“TMI Mom. TMI.”

Mom’s smile got bigger. “Admit it, Dante. He’s a great dancer.”

“He dances like an arthritic old man,” Dante replied. His dimples made a brief appearance.

Dad’s narrowed eyed gaze fixed on Dante. “Arthritic old man?” He cracked his

knuckles.

Oh shit! I jabbed my elbow into Dante's stomach. Was he deliberately trying to provoke a fight? "Let's do a dance off," I hurriedly suggested.

Mom nodded. "Loser buys dinner at Charlie's Steakhouse."

"An easy win," Dante chortled.

Dad glowered at him.

Dante winked at me and unleashed a raunchy routine that made me blush. "Are your panties wet, yet?"

"God, yes," I gasped.

Mom nodded her head. "If I was wearing any."

A low growl broke from Dad. He rolled his hips and began a sensuous dance that had me gaping in astonishment. He could really turn it on, and at that moment I knew Mom had never stood a chance. Dad had seduction down to an art form.

A devilish gleam in his eyes, Dante spun me around him. "Let's show them how it's done."

Grinning like a loon, I undulated against his groin.

Dad gave Mom a bawdy lap dance.

"What the hell?" Sergeant Bergman hollered.

Julie clapped loudly. “Way to go! For an old guy, you’ve got some moves, sir.”

“Old guy,” Dad grumbled, scooped up Mom and stomped down the hallway.

“I think our dance-off is a tie,” I called after him.

Dad slammed his bedroom door.

“Where did your dad learn to dance like that?” Julie asked, fanning herself.

Dante smirked. “He was a Chippendales dancer in his youth.”

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Julie stared at Dante in disbelief. “You mean, like women were stuffing dollar bills in his G-string and copping a feel?”

“Exactly.”

“Whoa!” Julie giggled. “I bet he has been giving your mom private dances for years. Which would explain why there are six of you.”

“I’m never going to unsee that,” Sergeant Bergman muttered.

The expression on Sergeant Bergman’s face was hysterical. “Did you need something sir?”

“We’re out of coffee. I wanted to borrow some.”

Fighting back a grin, I nodded. “Not a problem. I’ll get you some.” I walked back into the kitchen.

“How long have you known about your father’s frisky dancing skills?” Sergeant Bergman inquired.

“About ten minutes.” I opened a cabinet, grabbed a five-pound bag of Arabica coffee beans and held it out. “Here ya go.”

Sergeant Bergman’s eyebrows rose as he took it. “Ten minutes?”

“Yep. We kinda walked in on them. Gotta say it was a bit of a shock, but it does

explain where I got my love of dancing from.”

Dante grinned. “Your old man has some wicked moves.”

“That he does.” I patted Dante’s butt. “Tonight, I’m giving you a lap dance you’ll never forget.”

“I look forward to it,querida.”

Sergeant Bergman barked, “Not another word about your sex life or anyone else’s.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“I think a retreat is in order to give your dad time to cool off,” Julie said.

“Damn good idea. Everyone out!” Sergeant Bergman yanked open the kitchen door.

“Do your brothers know about your parents’ proclivities?”

I grimaced. “Nope, and I’m not telling them.”

“My lips are sealed,” Julie added.

Horn blaring, a silver Toyota Camry crawled into the parking lot and a woman screamed, “Help us! Please help us!”

A smile touched my mouth as we all carefully surveyed the area, then cautiously approached the car. We were a well-oiled team.

“What’s wrong, ma’am?” Sergeant Bergman inquired.

“Bomb! There’s a bomb on my husband’s lap!” The woman shrieked.

We all had our flashlights out and fixed on the white-faced husband. On his lap was a box with a pipe bomb in it.

“Oh, hell.” The timer showed twelve minutes before it went kablooey.

Sergeant Bergman commanded, “Put the car in park and turn the engine off.”

“I told him not to take the box, but he wouldn’t listen to me,” the woman sobbed as she obeyed.

“I don’t want to die,” the husband cried, holding out the box. “Please, I don’t want to die.”

“Put the box down slowly! If you want to live, don’t move a muscle,” Dante instructed.

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“Yes, sir.”

Dante slowly opened the passenger door and examined the bomb. “It’s well made. I need a bomb kit.”

“I’ll get one for you,” I said.

Sergeant Bergman advised, “I left the door open.”

“Yes, sir.” I sprinted into the training center, typed in the pass code for the supply closet and took a bomb kit.

Julie dragged the hysterical woman into the center and put her in a holding cell. “She tried to make a run for it.”

“Bad move. My partner has won a bunch of medals for the fifty-yard dash.”

Julie put on her menacing cop face. “Which house did you take the package from?”

“You don’t understand. We needed the money.”

“Which house?” Julie repeated sternly.

“It’s a couple of miles from here. The mailbox looks like a boat engine.”

Damn. That house belonged to Chuck Hennessey, a trigger-happy retired postal worker. “I’ll let the sarge know.”

Julie nodded. "Your mom and dad are out there too and he's still a bit snappy."

"Oh yay." I raced back to the Camry and handed Dante the bomb kit. "They took the box from Chuck Hennessey's porch."

Dad grimaced. "Chuck spent four years as an explosive expert in the Army."

"He's also in the early stages of dementia," Mom added.

Sergeant Bergman rubbed his face. "Hennessey also has enough guns to start a small war."

I waved wildly at Nate as he pulled up in his big red GMC dually.

He jumped out and hurried over to us. "What's up?"

"Get your bomb gear," Dad ordered.

Nate took one look at the timer "Yes, sir."

"Gemma, I want you to do a welfare check on Chuck Hennessey. Make sure he's okay and see what bomb making materials he has on hand," Sergeant Bergman directed.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm going with her. Chuck likes me," Mom said.

Dad nodded. "Be careful."

"I'm always careful," Mom retorted.

Dad snorted.

“You armed, Mom?”

Mom shot me a look. “When am I not?”

“I wasn’t sure since you were getting it on with Dad.”

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“Sweetie, I’ve gotten it on with your father in a foxhole, and we were still able to fight.”

Nate’s eyes bugged.

Gak! “TMI, Mom.”

“You asked.”

She had a point. I hurried into the training center. “Have you learned anything else, Julie?”

“Yeah, not only is the trunk full of pilfered packages, but they also have a storage unit full of stolen goods.” Julie took a radio from the charging unit and attached it to her gun belt.

Mom sighed. “Let me guess. They sell the stuff at the local flea markets?”

“Yep.”

I opened my locker, grabbed my gun belt and strapped it on. “Sarge wants me to check on Chuck Hennessey and see what kind of bomb making materials he has on hand.”

“There’s no tellin’ what kind of stuff that crazy old coot has stashed away,” Julie eyed my mom. “I take it breakfast is a no-go today.”

Mom grimaced. “It is, but I have a batch of Rosita’s tamales in the fridge.”

“Yum.” I slid my Glock into the holster. “Mom says Chuck has dementia too.”

“Shit! Dementia makes them mean.”

Sergeant Bergman stuck his head in the door. “Garza, go with her.”

“Yes, sir.” Julie pointed at the still sobbing woman. “You need to double-check the trunk. They’ve stolen from Hennessey before.”

“Damn!” The sarge spun on his heel and hurried back to the Camry.

Mom smiled evilly. “You can’t cure stupid, but you sure as hell can lock it up.”

“So true.” Julie snatched a set of keys off the pegboard and tossed me a radio. “I’m driving.”

I rolled my eyes and followed her across the parking lot. “I’m sorry we ruined your sexy time, Mom.”

“Me too.”

With Mom’s help, we quickly checked the patrol car for contraband, bombs, and any damage.

Mom wrinkled her nose. “Your car smells like old farts.”

“Easy fix. We have Stink Away in the trunk,” I said.

Julie popped the trunk, and I grabbed the bottle and sprayed the back seat. “Better,

Mom?"

"It is, but I'm keeping the Stink Away."

I shrugged. "Okay, we've got more."

Mom climbed in and drenched the floor mats.

"We need to have a long talk with Scotty about his obsessive farting." Julie said as I slid into the front seat.

"All he needs to do is lay off the Mexican food."

Mom laughed. "When your brothers were younger, they used to have fart contests. The house reeked for hours."

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“What makes you think they’ve stopped?” I rolled the window down.

Julie keyed her radio mic, “Radio, show Charlie-24 and Charlie-23 en route to 40325 West Windmill Road on a welfare check.”

“Copy Charlie-24,” the dispatcher responded.

As we rolled past the Camry, the guys were carefully examining a shitload of packages.

Chapter Two

The sun seeped over the White Tank Mountains, turning the morning sky a beautiful apricot pink.

“I love this time of day. It’s so peaceful, birdsong fills the air, and the smell of fresh cut grass makes you think of picnics at the park,” Julie sighed.

“You do know, you just jinxed us, right?” I handed Julie a candy bar. “Eat that before you start spouting lame poetry.”

“My poetry isn’t lame!”

I snickered. “Roses are red, violets are blue and if you steal my car, I’ll smash your face.”

“Hey, it rhymes. Sorta,” Julie protested.

Mom chimed in, “You’re much better at writing murder mysteries, Julie.”

“Thanks. I actually made money on The Nun Did it?”

I grinned. “Using the stuff that happens on our calls was a streak of genius.”

“What I like about writing is I can kill as many people as I want and not go to jail.”

A pack of yipping coyotes darted into the roadway in hot pursuit of something small and white.

Julie flipped on the sirens.

The noise frightened the coyotes off.

She slammed on the brakes, missing the white critter by inches. “Whew! That was close. I bet one of Betty White’s rabbits got loose again.”

“You know what that means, don’t you? Yucky lemonade and stale, rock-hard cookies,” I moaned.

“Go catch the little guy and after we visit Chuck, we’ll take the bunny home,” Mom said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Julie and I said in unison.

A flock of loudly honking geese flew over us.

Splat!Splat!Splat!Splat!Splat! Splat! Splat!Bird poop covered the patrol car.

“I told you, you jinxed us,” I cried.

Julie hit the windshield wipers. “Did not.” The blades just smeared the crap around. “Damn, we’re out of wiper fluid.”

Mom started laughing as the stench of cow manure suddenly permeated the car.

“What did you say?” I tapped my chin. “Oh, yeah, peace, birdsong and the smell of fresh cut grass.”

Julie released the hood latch. “Go ahead, yuck it up.”

“Pop the trunk and I’ll get the wiper fluid. With our luck we’ll get in a pursuit and if we wreck another patrol car, the sarge will put us on a walking beat.”

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“Or have us guarding prisoners on trash pickup detail,” Julie groaned.

“Ugh.” I got out of the car and almost stepped on a kitten. “Hey, little guy. were those mean ole’ coyotes chasing you?”

The kitten mewed pathetically.

I picked the shivering kitty up and cuddled it against my chest. “It’s okay. You’re safe now.”

“Girl or a boy?” Mom wanted to know.

I took a quick look. “A little girl.”

“Give her to me. I have some jerky in my purse.”

Mom always had food in her purse, along with an assortment of weapons.

Julie rolled the back window down and I handed Mom the kitten.

“Oh, you poor thing, you’re nothing but skin and bones. Don’t you worry. We’ll fix you right up.” Mom tore off a piece of jerky and gave it to the hungry kitten.

I couldn’t wait to see the expression on Dad’s face when Mom brought the kitten home. He wasn’t a cat person. Nope, he liked his K-9’s big and well-trained. After he lost Bruno in the line of duty, he had never gotten another dog. I grabbed the bottle of wiper fluid out of the trunk.

“We need to take Miss Kitty to the vet too,” Mom called.

I grinned. She had already named her. “Okay, Mom.” I filled the reservoir. “Try it now, Jullie.”

Julie turned the wiper blades on, but all they did was smear the bird crap around.

I poured the washer fluid directly on the windshield and the wipers finally cleared the mess. “That’s as good as it’s gonna get.”

Julie gave me a thumbs-up.

I shut the hood and grimaced. The patrol car was a goopy mess. “We’ll have to hit a car wash before the heat hardens the bird crap.”

“I’ll add that to our to-do list.”

Dumping the empty bottle in the trunk, I glanced at Miss Kitty and smiled. She was a cute little thing.

“Move it, Gemma. Daylight is burning.”

I saluted Julie and got in the car. Zoom! Off we went. Before I could fasten my seatbelt, the car hit a pothole, and I bounced off the roof. “Hey! Slow it down!”

Julie brought the patrol car to a sudden stop. “Holy cow! Would you look at that. It’s like he went to the dump and brought it all home.”

Pushing myself off the dash, I looked around in disbelief. Chuck’s doublewide trailer had seen better days. The porch leaned to the left and badly needed a new coat of paint. Car doors, old tires, boxes of God knows what, huge clown heads, and piles of

trash bags were strewn around the front yard.

I eyed the stack of stained mattresses in the bed of Chuck's old Ford truck. "He's turned this place into a hoarder's wet dream."

"I checked on Chuck about six weeks ago and it wasn't this bad," Mom exclaimed.

Julie shuddered. "What kind of nasty critters are lurking in that mess?"

"Don't know. Don't wanna know and I ain't lookin'."

Chuck charged out of the trailer with a shotgun in his hands. "Git!" He fired a round in the dirt. "Or I'll start shooting."

"Damn, he's not wearing his glasses," Mom sighed.

A laugh broke from me. "Or his pants."

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“Ugh. His ratty tee-shirt doesn’t cover much either.” Julie flipped on the sirens.

Chuck stopped and peered at us.

Shutting the sirens off, Julie turned on the loudspeaker. “Chuck, put the gun down. It’s Gemma, Tess and Julie.”

“Tess?”

“Yes, Tess. Now put the shotgun down,” Julie ordered.

Chuck placed it on the ground.

I quickly hopped out. “Why are you shooting at us Chuck?”

“Dang porch pirates keep taking my stuff.”

Trying to ignore his dangly bits, I picked up the shotgun and unloaded it. “We have your porch pirates in custody.”

“Huh?” He rubbed his chin. “They’re still alive?”

“Yes.” Julie narrowed her eyes. “Why are you putting bombs in packages, Chuck?”

His yellowed teeth bared in a snarl, Chuck hollered, “I’ve lost twenty packages to those low-life thieves. Dagnabbit! It should have gone off.”

Julie and I exchanged horrified glances. He had just admitted to attempted murder.

“The boys disarmed it. You can’t kill people who steal from you,” Mom lectured, petting the loudly purring kitten.

Chuck blinked at her. “Sure, I can.”

“Go inside and get dressed.” When Mom got that certain look in her eyes and used her mean mother voice, she was ten seconds away from kicking your ass.

Chuck stomped his foot like a toddler having a temper tantrum. “Don’t wanna. Too hot for clothes.”

“Not even for some cookies?” Mom’s voice had a steely edge to it.

Julie whispered, “Your Mom’s right eye is twitching.

“I know.” We both backed up a step.

Chuck’s face lit up. “Chocolate chip?”

“Yes. Now scoot. You’re embarrassing my girls.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Chuck hurried off.

Mom cursed loudly in Farsi.

My Farsi wasn’t that good, but she had said something gross about a camel’s dick. I turned my attention back to Chuck and made a face. God did he have a hairy ass and what was the brown stuff stuck to his left butt cheek. Oh, yuck. It looked like dried chocolate pudding. He wasn’t riding in our patrol car without pants on.

Julie frowned. “Do you think Chuck makes his bombs in the trailer or in the barn?”

“With our luck, probably both.” Using my official sheriff’s cellphone, I started taking pictures of the hoarder’s mess.

“Watch out for the rattlesnake,” Julie called.

I jumped about a foot. A bull snake crawled away. “Not funny.”

Julie just grinned.

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Mom held out her purse. “Find my cellphone, Gemma. I don’t want to put Miss Kitty down.”

“Okay.” I dug around in her purse. Huh? Mom had a flashbang, a smoke grenade and a tomahawk. What the heck was she planning on doing with them? Did I really want to know? Nope. I held out her cellphone. “Here ya go.”

“Thanks. While you’re checking the barn, I’ll call your father and let him know Chuck is the mad bomber. Be sure to watch for booby traps, now.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Julie and I said in unison and started down the crude path that wound through the chest-high weeds.

I examined the ground in front of us. “I’m not seeing any trip wires, are you?”

“Nope, and if there were any, Chuck would have blown himself up by now.”

“Good point.”

Julie glanced over her shoulder. “Sometimes your mom is downright scary.”

“It’s the only way she keeps the boys in line,” I stated.

“They can get a little rowdy.”

I snorted. “Ya think?” The back of the trailer was worse than the front. There had to be at least fifty rotted tires, a slew of old bicycles, and a dozen mannequins. I quickly

documented the mess and forwarded the pictures to Sergeant Bergman. “What is he planning on doing with all of this crap?”

“That is the million-dollar question.” Julie put out her arm to stop me. “Looky there.”

I let out a whistle and snapped some shots of the trip wire. “Gotta say, I’m a bit surprised. With his dementia, I didn’t think Chuck could rig up a laser beam trip wire.”

“He couldn’t. Someone must be helping him, but what is the endgame?”

“Dunno, this case keeps getting worse and worse. I peered into the dim interior of the barn. On a cluttered workbench were several packages of C4, gunpowder and lead pipes. I took more pictures. “I think we’d better wait for Nate and his squad to check this place out.”

“I agree.” Julie pointed her flashlight at the corner of the barn and gasped. “Oh hell! Those are Claymore mines!”

I focused on six gray-green plastic cases with scissor-like legs and took more photos. A pile of sweating dynamite sticks sat next to them. “Shit! It won’t take much to set off that crystallized nitroglycerin. If they blow, so will the Claymore mines and the C4 too.” I sent the photos to Sergeant Bergman, Dad and Nate.

My cellphone rang.

“Deputy Stone.”

Sergeant Bergman growled. “Get out of there.”

“Yes, sir. Nate is going to have his hands full with this mess.”

“The bomb squad ETA is fifteen minutes. Evacuate to the roadway,” Sergeant Bergman instructed.

“Yes, sir.”

Two chickens strutted into the barn, breaking the laser beam.

“Oh, shit!”

“Run,” Julie yelled.

I ran for my life.

“What’s going on?” Sergeant Bergman shouted.

Kablooey! A huge fireball rose high into the sky.

The force of the blast sent us flying, head over heels. I landed on a stained mattress in the bed of Chuck’s truck. Julie fell on top of me. Pain radiated through my face, and I could feel blood running down my chin. God, I hoped I hadn’t broken my nose.

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Julie gagged. “These mattresses smell like urine.”

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Julie and I dove under Chuck’s truck as flaming debris rained down. The ground shook beneath us as the dynamite and Claymores continued to explode.

The dispatcher called, “Charlie-24 state the nature of your emergency.”

“I must have hit the emergency button on my radio,” Julie gasped and keyed her mic, “We have multiple explosions involving hazardous materials. We need all the fire trucks you can send us and the bomb squad.”

“Copy Charlie-24,” the dispatcher replied. “Are you or Charlie-23 in need of the paramedics?”

A flaming tire rolled past us.

“Not yet,” Julie answered, totally ignoring the large cut on her forehead.

“OMG! Mom!”

Our patrol car skidded to a stop and Mom yelled, “Get in.”

We crawled out from under the truck and scrambled into the back seat. Mom put it in reverse and gunned it.

Pieces of the barn crashed down around us.

I glanced out the window and gasped. The trailer and all the crazy old coot’s treasures were on fire too. Thick black smoke filled the air. “Where’s Chuck?”

“He barricaded himself in the trailer,” Mom replied, slamming on the brakes. “How badly are you hurt?”

I wiped at the blood running down my chin. “Just a bloody nose and some minor cuts.”

“Dammit! I ruined another uniform,” Julie grouched.

“Are you hurt, Julie,” Mom demanded.

“Same as Gemma. Minor cuts and bruises. No need for the paramedics.”

Mom glanced at us in the rearview mirror. “Really? You both look like you were in a brawl and lost. Your uniforms are a mess, and I’m not even going to discuss your hair. You need to get checked out.”

“No, we do not,” Julie protested.

Even if I were missing an arm, they weren’t taking me to the emergency room again. “How many times has someone assaulted us or tried to kill us in the hospital, Mom?”

Mom exhaled a long breath. “Several times. You can discuss it with your father or Sergeant Bergman.”

“We can make a run for it,” Julie whispered.

I shook my head. “Dad’s too good a tracker and Sergeant Bergman would put us on dead animal pickup for a year.”

“Yeah, he has a mean streak.” Julie slumped against the seat.

Two patrol cars pulled up. Dad, Sergeant Bergman, Frank and Nate climbed out carrying bomb gear.

“Any serious injuries?” Dad’s gaze roamed over us.

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We all shook our heads.

Miss Kitty meowed loudly.

Dad's eyes narrowed.

"Chuck is still refusing to come out of his trailer," Mom warned, putting the kitten on her lap. "And he has several sticks of dynamite on his kitchen table."

"If it's like the stuff in the barn, it's crystallized," I interjected.

The muscles bunched in Dad's jaw. "Fuck!" He ran up the rickety steps and kicked in the trailer door.

Sergeant Bergman, Nate and Frank followed Dad inside.

A minute later, Sergeant Bergman and Frank dragged a loudly protesting Chuck out of the burning trailer. "You have no right to arrest me."

"How about attempted murder, three sticks of crystallized dynamite and a landmine," Sergeant Bergman bellowed.

"I want a lawyer."

Frank snapped, "You have the right to remain silent. So, shut the fuck up." He stuffed Chuck in the back of his patrol car."

Mom shot a worried look at the trailer. “Where’s Alex and Nate?”

“They’re checking for more explosive devices,” Sergeant Bergman answered. “I need you to move the patrol car down to the mailbox. The fire department will be here shortly.”

“I’m not leaving until Alex and Nate are safe,” Mom protested.

Dad and Nate charged out of the thick smoke. “Run!”

Sergeant Bergman jumped into his patrol car.

Dad dived into the front seat of our patrol car, while Nate stuffed himself into the back with us. “Get us out of here!” They yelled in unison.

Stomping on the gas pedal, Mom backed the patrol car down the rutted driveway and brought it to a sudden stop next to Chuck’s mailbox.

Sergeant Bergman and Frank parked their cars next to us.

“The fool had Claymore mines next to his bed,” Dad growled.

The trailer exploded in a gout of dirty orange flames. Black funnels of smoke filled the sky and burning debris plunked down around us.

Sirens blaring, two fire trucks skidded to a stop behind us.

Dad, Nate and Sergeant Bergman went to talk with them.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

The double-wide disintegrated into a pile of burning rubble.

A chicken with charred feathers smacked onto the windshield.

“I think we need to buy some lotto tickets and book a trip to Las Vegas. Your luck is phenomenal,” Mom said.

A slightly hysterical laugh broke from Julie. “Lucky? Us?”

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“You’re still alive,” Mom replied.

The car door opened. “Out,” Dad ordered. “The paramedics are here.”

“So? We’re fine,” I replied, not budging an inch.

Sergeant Bergman barked, “Stone. Garza. Get your asses out of the car. Now!”

“Yes, sir.” I reluctantly obeyed and caught a glimpse of myself in the side mirror. Yikes! My face and the front of my uniform were a bloody mess. All from a stupid nosebleed.

An unmarked car slid to a stop and Dante bailed out. He rushed over to me.

I held up a hand. “I’m okay. It’s only a nosebleed.”

“The paramedics are checking you over,” Dante stated.

“But...”

Dante put a finger against my lips. “No arguments.” He snagged Julie’s arm. “You too, Tiny.”

“Tiny? That’s just mean,” Julie protested, trying to pull her arm free. “I might not be as tall as Gemma, but I can kick like a mule. Wanna find out?”

Mom wrapped an arm around Julie. “C’mon, let’s get your owies fixed.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Chapter Three

I frowned at the pimply-faced paramedic standing next to Jerry, the senior medic. He looked like he was sixteen. “Jerry, could you please tell Dante that all the blood is from my nosebleed.”

“Won’t know until I can check you over.” Jerry patted the gurney. “Up you go.”

Dante picked me up and put me on a gurney.

“No lap dance for you tonight, Detective.”

Dante leaned down until his lips brushed mine. “Not a problem. I’ll give you a private dance instead,” he murmured.

My lady parts clenched. With a single touch Dante turned my anger into desire. The rat bastard smiled at me and my willpower melted away. “Okay.”

“Just slap a bandage on my cut and I’m good to go,” Julie said.

Jerry raised his eyebrows. “That cut on your forehead needs stitches and so does the one on your arm. Eddie will take care of you.”

Shit! How had I not noticed her badly bleeding arm?

“When did you start hiring kids?” Julie retorted as the pimply-faced teenager helped her on the gurney.

Mom gave Julie the stink eye. “Manners.”

“I’m twenty-five,” Eddie said and placed a large trauma pad on her cut arm. “I graduated at the top of my class.”

Julie winced. “Sorry. I’m a little stressed out.”

Eddie glanced over at the burning debris. “I can see why.”

Frank dragged Chuck over to the paramedics. “I need him checked out too.”

Jerry eyed the old guy. “Where are his pants?”

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“I burned them all,” Chuck spat. “My junk needs to be free.”

I rolled my eyes. “I have a jumpsuit that should fit him in the trunk, Frank.”

“Nope. Not wearing it,” Chuck yelled and wrestled with Frank.

Frank snarled, “Knock it off, I don’t want to hurt you.”

Mom held out a cookie. “Chuck! Want a chocolate chip cookie?”

“Okay.” Chuck snatched it out of her hand and stuffed it in his mouth.

I grimaced as crumbs rained down on his now perky man part and tried to slide off the gurney.”

Dante stopped me. “I’ll get the jumpsuit.”

“Bless you.”

Chuck bellowed, “Want more. Now! Now! Now!” He rushed Mom.

With one slick move, Mom had Chuck face down on the ground. “Behave.”

“Wanna cookie,” Chuck whined.

“After you put the jumpsuit on,” Dante said and held it out.

To my relief, Chuck obeyed.

Mom gave him another cookie.

“Dementia?” Jerry asked.

Mom nodded. “We’re trying to get hold of his family.”

“We’ll treat your deputies,” Jerry said and pointed to another paramedic unit parking behind a fire truck. “Frank, have Gonzales check out your prisoner. He has more experience dealing with dementia patients than I do.”

“Okay.” Frank led Chuck off.

Whump. Whump. Whump.

I glanced up. A slew of news choppers hovered overhead. I gave them the one-fingered salute. “Ha! You’re not getting a shot of me in my underwear this time.”

“I’ll take your gun belts and radios,” Dante said.

I reared back in horror. “Are you crazy? I’m not going to the hospital unarmed.”

Julie added, “Me neither.”

Dante stared at us for a long moment and pulled out two chocolate bars. “I’ll bring more later.”

I snatched it out of his hand. “The good stuff, okay.”

“Yeah, Cerreta’s,” Julie added, ripping off the wrapper.

“Delgado,” Dad shouted. “We need you over here.”

Mom patted his arm. “Go. I’ll watch over the girls.”

“Try not to shoot up the hospital again.”

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“If we are attacked, I’m not making any promises,” Mom replied.

“Delgado,” Sergeant Bergman bellowed.

Dante gently kissed me and jogged over to my father.

Kaboom!Flaming debris rained down on us.

“Was that a Claymore or dynamite?” Julie asked.

Thud!A tire hit the top of the ambulance.

I eyed the burning fragments raining down on us. “Dynamite.”

“Time to leave,” Jerry cried. As soon as Mom was inside the ambulance, he shut the doors. “Go,” he shouted to Eddie.”

Eddie stomped on the gas and off we went, lights and sirens blaring.

I slid off the gurney and fell on Mom.

Miss Kitty poked her head out of Mom’s purse and hissed at me.

“Sorry Miss Kitty.” I climbed off Mom. “Is it a good idea to have the kitten in your purse? I mean, what if she sets off the flashbang.”

“She’s too small and it was the only place I could put her.”

“And you didn’t want to argue with Dad in public,” I added.

Mom grinned. “I’ll give your dad a lap dance and he’ll do whatever I want.”

“TMI Mom. TMI.”

Jerry nodded his head. “Yeah, TMI.”

The ambulance swerved wildly.

“What’s going on?” I yelled.

Eddie hollered, “A black SUV is trying to run us off the road.”

Bang! The ambulance fishtailed violently.

“A man in a ski mask is pointing his AK-47 rifle at us. He wants me to stop,” Eddie yelled.

Mom pulled her gun. “Do it.”

“Is that a good idea?” Jerry asked nervously.

Julie and I drew our weapons. “Yep. Unless you want to crash.”

“Hit your emergency alert button Gemma,” Mom ordered.

I did as she asked.

The dispatcher called, “Charlie-23 what is the nature of your emergency?”

“Our ambulance is under attack by armed suspects in a black SUV. We need backup,” I replied.

The dispatcher calmly responded, “State your location.”

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“Where are we, Eddie?” Julie demanded.

“The 303 and Sun Valley Parkway.”

I keyed my mic and gave the dispatcher our location.

“Copy Charlie-23.”

Julie and I turned off our radios.

The ambulance came to an abrupt stop.

“There are four masked men armed with assault rifles,” Eddie advised.

A scary smile on her face, Mom ordered, “Jerry, you and Eddie put your hands up and don’t say a word.”

“Yes, ma’am,” they replied.

“You two moan and I’ll do my crazy granny act.”

Julie and I exchanged grins and hid our weapons.

The rear doors were yanked open and the men pointed AK-47s at us. “No one moves.”

Oh goodie, they were armed to the teeth and wearing body armor too. I groaned

pitifully.

“Where is the old man?” the taller thug demanded.

Mom cried, “Freddie! It’s about fucking time you showed up. Where is your brother?”

“Brother?” the taller thug repeated.

With a bloodcurdling scream, Mom jumped to her feet. “Rattlesnake!”

“Rattlesnake?” The masked men backed up a step.

“Nah, it’s just a bull snake.” She held up a snake. “See?” Mom tossed it at them.

It hit the tall guy in the face, and he yelped, “It bit me!”

“Whoops, my bad. Guess it was a rattlesnake.” Mom cackled wildly and asked, “You guys got any antivenom?”

Jerry shook his head.

“Guess you’ll have to come to the hospital with us. Is your face going numb yet?”

“No.”

“It’s only a matter of time,” Mom said sadly.

Jerry asked, “How is your breathing?”

“Shut up! All of you shut the hell up,” the squat thug shouted. “Where is Chuck

Hennessy?”

Jerry shrugged. “Dunno.”

“You don’t know where the love of my life is?” Mom screeched. “Why not?”

Jerry’s eyes widened. “Cause the other ambulance took him.”

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“Enough!” The squat thug fired a round into the air. “Call your dispatch center and find out.”

The tall thug suddenly fell to the ground and didn’t move.

“Oh, my God,” Mom shrieked. “You shot him!”

The squat thug stared at his buddy in disbelief. “Did not. It’s the rattlesnake venom.”

“Bastard! Did you kill Chuck too?” Mom whipped out her Mace and sprayed the hell out of the remaining thugs.

Julie and I fired off a volley of bullets, hitting their vests numerous times. The thugs flew backwards and hit the ground hard. The pain would keep them down and out of commission for a while.

“Go. Go. Go, Eddie,” Mom yelled.

Eddie stomped on the gas and as we passed the black SUV, we shot out the tires.

I laughed. “Well, that was fun.”

“Fun?” Jerry exclaimed. “Your entire family is nuts.”

“And proud of it,” Mom said. “Quick! Turn off your cellphones before the menfolk start calling.”

“I can’t do that, Mom.”

In the distance dozens of sirens sounded.

My cellphone rang. “Deputy Stone.” I flinched. “It’s okay, Dad. Mom did her crazy old lady act. We’re heading for the hospital, and we left you a present at the 303 and Sun Valley Parkway.” I handed Mom my phone. “Dad wants to talk to you.”

“We’re fine. The idiots not so much. Uh huh. I didn’t. His buddy shot him. You need to let Frank know they are looking for his prisoner. Okay.” Mom disconnected and gave me back my phone.”

“What did Dad say?”

Mom grumbled, “I’m not allowed to shoot anyone else today.”

“That’s okay, he didn’t say we couldn’t.”

Julie’s phone rang. She glanced at the caller ID. “I think Sergeant Bergman is about to tell us the same thing.” She swiped right. “Deputy Garza. Yes, sir. No, sir. Gotcha.” Julie disconnected. “Yep, no shooting anyone and I gotta know. Where did you get that freakin’ snake?”

“Miss Kitty caught it. It was under the front seat,” Mom replied.

Julie growled, “I’m gonna kill Scotty.”

“Paybacks are a bitch,” I inserted. “We need to stop by Everson’s Reptile House and buy some baby snakes.”

Julie grinned. “Yes, we do.”

“You girls are downright scary,” Jerry commented.

I patted his knee. “Don’t piss us off and you don’t have anything to worry about.”

Jerry raised an eyebrow. “That’s not reassuring.”

“We have a police escort,” Eddie called.

I frowned. “I bet they’re gonna try to take our guns away too.”

“Over my dead body,” Mom hissed.

I bared my teeth in a deadly smile. “Exactly.”

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The ambulance pulled to a stop at the emergency room doors. Doc Halliday opened the back doors. “Any bullet wounds or broken bones?”

“No, I have a bloody nose and Julie has two cuts,” I replied.

“I was told you were caught in a bomb blast.”

Julie rolled her eyes. “A minor blast and we took cover.”

“Minor?” Doc Halliday raised an eyebrow. “I saw the news reports. You’re lucky to be alive.”

I snorted. “Everything would have been fine if the damn chickens hadn’t triggered the trip wire.”

“Chickens?”

A very naked Chuck raced out of the emergency room with Frank and Hank, the security guard, in hot pursuit.

Frank shouted, “Come back here, you crazy old man. Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home! I’m going home.”

“Cookie,” Mom yelled.

Chuck did an 180 and ran over to us.

Mom held out the cookie.

Frank grabbed Chuck and quickly cuffed him.

“Cookie. Cookie. Cookie,” Chuck whined.

Mom gave the cookie to Hank. “It’ll calm him down.

“I hope so. He’s pretty fast for an old guy.”

Doc Halliday motioned to an orderly. “Put Chuck in room three.”

“Yes, sir.” The orderly and Frank lifted Chuck onto a gurney and rolled him away.

Julie frowned. “Got any aspirin? I’ve got a killer headache.”

“Take them to room two, Jerry,” Doc Halliday instructed.

Jerry nodded. “Yes, sir.” He pulled back the privacy curtain and moved us onto the hospital beds. “Ladies, it’s been interesting.”

“I’ve heard stories about you two, but I never believed them, until now,” Eddie added.

Julie rolled her eyes. “We’re just doing our jobs.”

“Uh, huh. It was like something out of the wild, wild West.”

“Arizona still has outlaws,” I responded.

Eddie grabbed their equipment. “I’m thinking of rotating to Sun City where all I have to deal with are harmless old folks.”

“Harmless?” I started laughing.

Mom and Julie joined in.

“What’s so funny?”

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“Sun City residents are far from harmless,” Doc Halliday replied.

Eddie looked confused. “But they’re old. How much trouble can they get into?”

I laughed harder.

“Explain it to him, Jerry,” Doc Halliday instructed.

Jerry exhaled a long breath. “Yes, sir.”

“Don’t forget to tell him about all the orgies,” Julie called.

Eddie exclaimed, “Orgies? Old folks still have sex?”

Mom chortled as a cry of disapproval erupted in the waiting room. Most of the sick and injured were over sixty.

“I’ll explain everything outside,” Jerry growled.

“But...”

“Outside,” Jerry snarled.

Doc Halliday shook his head. “The kid is in for a few surprises.”

“Ya think?” Mom quipped.

The emergency room doors slid open and in stomped the entire Glendale Police Department's SWAT team.

"That can't be good." My hand dropped to the butt of my Glock.

Sergeant Durham walked over to us and winced. "I heard you two blew up Chuck Hennessey's place."

"We did not blow it up," I retorted. "The chickens did."

Sergeant Durham grinned. "Chickens, huh? You gonna stick to that story?"

Julie gave him the stink eye.

"Did Alex send you?" Mom asked sweetly.

Sergeant Durham shook his head. "We're here to guard the prisoners the three of you shot."

"They attacked our ambulance. We stopped them," Julie said.

Durham frowned. "They still had plenty of fight left in them when your deputies rolled up. Only two of them survived the shootout."

My stomach knotted. "Any of our guys hurt?"

"No," Sergeant Durham answered.

I sagged in relief.

"Why is Chuck so important to them?" Mom mused.

Sergeant Durham shook his head. “Don’t know and they’re in no shape to answer questions right now.”

The emergency room doors whooshed open, and the paramedics rushed in with two badly bleeding thugs. Six heavily armed Peoria Police officers followed on their heels.

“Doctor Jones is set up in OR one,” Doc Halliday called.

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“Yes, sir.” The paramedics pushed their patients down the hallway.

I grimaced. “You think their buddies will make another attempt to take Chuck?”

“We do,” Sergeant Durham answered. “Keep your eyes open.”

“Yes, sir,” we said in unison.

Durham’s phone rang. He glanced down at it and swiped right. “What can I do for you Chief?” He walked off.

I rubbed my aching forehead. What a clusterfuck. “Got any Tylenol, Doc?”

“I do but let me check you over first.” Doc Halliday tilted my head up and gently probed my face. “I don’t think anything is broken but Jenny, our x-ray tech, is going to take some pictures of your face and skull.”

Jenny, a fortyish woman wearing way too much makeup, smiled at me. “It won’t hurt a bit, and you even get a lollipop.”

“A lollipop?” What? Was I six?

Jenny added, “It’s chocolate.”

“Okay, I could use some chocolate.”

Doc Halliday queried, “You hurt anywhere else, Gemma?”

“Just some bruises on my back where Julie landed on me.”

The Doc poked around on my back. “Nothing serious. She’s all yours Jenny.”

“Great!” Jenny grabbed a wheelchair. “In you go.”

I got in the wheelchair.

“I’m going to hit the cafeteria,” Mom said.

My stomach rumbled hungrily. “Get me a breakfast sandwich and some tea, please.”

“Will do.” Mom gave me a package of wet wipes. “You need to clean the blood off your face. You’re scaring people.”

I looked around. Sure enough. Everyone was staring at me in horror. I carefully wiped the blood off.

“You missed a spot.” Jenny grabbed a wet wipe and rubbed it over my throbbing nose.

I flinched. “Uh, thanks.”

“Hold on,” Jenny said and off we zoomed.

People jumped out of the way. A few nurses even gave Jenny the one-fingered salute. We rushed toward a set of double doors. “Door! Door!” I warned. At the last second, the doors to X-ray opened and we whizzed inside. “Let me guess, you drive race cars.”

“Demolition derby,” Jenny corrected. “It’s a great stress reliever.”

“I bet it is, but my stomach is a little iffy right now. Can we slow down a bit?”

“Of course, Deputy.” Jenny wheeled me over to the X-ray machine.

The X-rays took about twenty minutes, and Jenny rolled me back to the emergency room at a snail’s pace. “Out.”

“Thanks.” I got out of the wheelchair.

Jenny popped a lollipop in her mouth and sauntered off.

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Bitch! That's when I noticed Mom and Julie were chowing down on sausage biscuits. My stomach growled.

"Here ya go." Mom tossed me a sandwich.

"Thanks." I wolfed it down.

Frank stuck his head in. "Where's my sandwich?"

"Who's watching Chuck?" I countered.

"Glendale and Peoria have a slew of officers guarding him."

Mom tossed Frank a wrapped biscuit. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Gotta say, I'm surprised there hasn't been another attempt to grab Chuck," Julie said.

Frank grinned. "Me too."

"Maybe the entire gang is dead or in custody," I said.

Mom shook her head. "Too easy. They are probably waiting for reinforcements."

"Cookie," Chuck bellowed.

Mom handed Frank two cookies. "That's the last of them."

“Thanks.” He hurried off.

Doc Halliday walked in. “You are both very lucky ladies. I’m releasing you and you are not to return to work for five days.” He handed us the work release documents.

“Why so long? It’s just a few bruises,” I asked.

Doc Halliday held up a hand mirror. “What do you see?”

“Ugh,” I grimaced. “It looks like someone beat the crap out of me.”

Doc put the mirror down. “Exactly. Not an image you want to present to the public. Plus, if you did get hit in the face again, you would probably lose consciousness.”

“Oh. That would suck big time.”

“Your dad has background checks he needs run. That’ll keep you busy,” Mom inserted.

Julie protested, “But I was going to work on my tan.”

“You are a member of the Alpha Dogs too,” Mom pointed out.

“Yes, ma’am. Background checks it is.”

Miss Kitty wiggled out of Mom’s purse and climbed up on her shoulder. Meow!

“Animals are not allowed in the hospital,” Doc Halliday grumbled.

Mom stroked Miss Kitty. “She’s a therapy cat.”

“It’s a kitten,” Doc Halliday pointed out.

Mom countered, “She’s a miniature.”

Doc Halliday narrowed his eyes. “Do you have the proper paperwork?”

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“Not yet.” Mom stood. “Let’s go. Logan left my truck in the parking lot.”

Doc Halliday planted his hands on his hips. “Don’t bring it back without the proper paperwork.”

“Her name is Miss Kitty, and I won’t.”

Julie whispered, “Sorry.”

“It’s a rescue,” I added and followed Mom out.

Chapter Four

Heat waves danced across the hospital’s parking lot. Beads of sweat dotted my skin and all I wanted was a big glass of iced tea. “Did any of the other packages contain bombs, Mom?”

Mom came to an abrupt stop and pointed. “What is that fool doing?”

I turned my head to see what she was talking about and my jaw dropped.

Cursing loudly, a big dude wearing a rumpled black business suit kicked the crap out of a yellow Ford. A geyser of steam rose from the engine compartment.

“His temper tantrum is gonna cost him big time,” Julie commented.

I watched him for a moment. “Think the heat got to him?”

“Well, wearing a black wool suit in this heat is beyond stupid,” Mom said.

Julie snorted. “I’ll say and what’s up with his funky sandals?”

The white lace-up Roman sandals should be worn at costume parties not with a business suit. “I bet he’s single. A wife wouldn’t let him leave the house dressed like that.”

“Depends on how big of a jerk he is. It’s the perfect payback,” Mom said.

The big dude climbed up on the hood and jumped up and down. The metal crumpled under the blows. “Worthless piece of crap! You belong in the junk yard!”

My eyebrows rose. “He’s about five minutes away from heat stroke.”

“Yep. We’d better stop him before he does something really dumb,” Mom said.

The man jerked out a Desert Eagle pistol and fired multiple rounds into the engine block. “Join that bitch in hell!”

“That just cost him a good forty thousand, and some jail time,” Julie growled.

I pulled my Glock and yelled, “Sheriff’s Office! Stop shooting!” Did he stop? Hell, no.

Using her mean mother voice, Mom shouted, “Drop your weapon! Now!”

The man didn’t even look at us. “Go away! I still have bullets left.”

“Do you want to die?” Julie yelled.

The man blinked. “What? This is my car. I have a right to shoot it.”

“You can’t discharge a firearm within the city limits. Now drop your gun, and get your hands up,” I commanded.

Six shotguns were racked. “You heard the deputies, put the Desert Eagle down or we’ll shoot your ass!” Sergeant Durham bellowed.

The color drained from the dude’s face when he saw all the guns pointed at him. The pistol fell from his nerveless fingers, and he raised his hands. “Don’t shoot me. Don’t shoot me!”

Smoke boiled from the hood. With a yelp, the idiot leapt off his car and was immediately tackled by two Peoria officers.

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The Ford burst into flames.

“Oh, hell.” I keyed my mic, “Charlie-23 to dispatch, we need the fire department for a car fire in the north parking lot of my location.”

“Copy Charlie-23.”

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bullets whizzed wildly in all directions, shattering windshields and blowing out windows.

Julie, Mom and I took cover behind a car. “Those bullets are coming from his car, and the idiot has some ’splaining to do,” I snapped.

“We should have kept walking,” Julie grumbled. “Now they’ll blame us for this too.”

“What the hell is in your car?” Sergeant Durham demanded.

“Bullets! I just picked up a box from Dillion’s Guns,” the dude cried.

Kaboom! The car blew into a thousand pieces and flaming debris rained down on the parking lot.

Thick black smoke billowed from the cremated remains.

Dozens of car alarms sounded.

Trees caught fire.

A burning tire ricocheted off a stop sign and smacked into an officer, knocking him flat.

Jerry and Eddie bailed out of their ambulance and dragged him to safety.

“What in the hell was in that idiot’s trunk?” Mom grumbled.

Julie made a face. “A gas can or two.?”

A fire truck rolled up and the firemen quickly got the inferno under control.

A Peoria officer stuffed the crazy dude in the backseat of his patrol car.

“I didn’t know this would happen. I didn’t know this would happen,” the dude cried.

“You’re damn lucky no one was seriously hurt.” The Peoria officer shut the car door on his protests.

Mom’s cell phone rang. “It’s your father and I bet he’s on a tear.” She let it ring several more times before swiping right. “Hello. What? No. We’re fine. Some moron shot up his car and it kinda got out of hand. Peoria PD and the Glendale SWAT team are handling the situation.” Mom frowned. “No, I don’t think it’s related to your current case. Uh huh. Okay, we’re heading home.” Mom disconnected. “I need some chocolate.”

“Me too. Let’s hit Cerreta’s. I could really use some French Mints,” I said.

Julie smiled. “Excellent idea.”

Sergeant Durham walked up and gave each of us a business card with a report number on the back. “I’ll need your supplemental reports by tomorrow.”

We nodded.

An officer shouted, “Sarge! The fire department found a body in the trunk!”

“What the hell?” Giving us the stink eye, Sergeant Durham jogged over to the burnt-out remains of the car.

“A criminal master mind, he’s not.” Julie said dryly.

I grimaced. “Nope, and if you’ve just killed someone having a public meltdown is beyond stupid.”

“Let’s get the hell out of Dodge, before they try to give you this clusterfuck,” Mom said and practically ran to her truck.

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Julie and I exchanged horrified looks and chased after Mom. The minute our butts hit the seats; Mom gunned it.

I glanced out the back window. Sergeant Durham watched us for a moment, then pulled out his phone. “God, I hope he’s not calling Sergeant Bergman about this clusterfuck.”

“If he does, Sergeant Bergman will put us on trash pickup detail for sure,” Julie said.

Mom smiled. “Relax girls, you’re on sick leave.”

“True and we did help collar a murderer,” Julie said.

My cell phone rang. I glanced at the caller ID. It was Dante. I swiped right and babbled, “We’re fine. Doc Halliday released us and we’re on sick leave for the next five days. I don’t know if you’ve heard but there was a shooting in the north parking lot. A car kinda blew up. The fire department found a body in the trunk, but relax, Glendale PD is taking jurisdiction.” There was dead silence. “Dante? Dante? Hello? Oh! Sergeant Durham is on your other phone. Okay. Talk to you later.” I quickly disconnected.

“How did he take it?” Julie wanted to know.

I shrugged. “Not sure. He was using his cop voice.”

“Give him a blow job. Works every time on your dad,” Mom said.

“TMI, Mom. TMI.”

Chapter Five

Cerreta’s Candy is a family-owned business in downtown Glendale. They make the best chocolate in the universe. I let out a groan when I spotted a school bus parked in front of the old brick building. “We’ll be in line forever.”

“Maybe they’re still giving the kids the tour,” Julie said.

I smiled. “Let’s hope.” I reached for the door handle.

“Wait!” Mom exclaimed. “You can’t go in there wearing a bloody uniform. You’ll scare the children.”

I sagged against the seat. “Damn.”

“There are some Alpha Dog tee-shirts in that shopping bag. Lose the gun belts too.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Julie and I quickly changed and put our Glocks in the built-in weapons safe. Mom was fanatical about gun safety.

Mom examined us. “You’ll do.”

We got out of the truck, and I snickered. Julie’s shirt was five sizes too big and hung past her knees.

She gave me the one-fingered salute.

My grin got bigger.

A little girl with flaming red hair ran up to us and sobbed, “He took Bobby. He took Bobby.”

“Who took Bobby?” I knelt beside her.

“The Stinky Man,” she cried.

Julie dropped onto her knees. “Where did this happen?”

“By the bus. He ran away when he saw you.” Her lips quivered. “He hit Bobby.”

A knot formed in my stomach. I hated child abductions. “Which way did Stinky Man go?”

The little girl shrugged.

“What does the Stinky Man look like?” Julie asked.

“Big. Dirty.”

Mom rubbed the little girl’s back. “What color shirt was Bobby wearing?”

“Yellow.”

Trying to conceal her fury, Julie inquired, “Does Bobby have red hair too?”

“Yes.” Tears ran down her face. “Please. Please. Save Bobby.”

“We will,” I promised.

Mom scowled. “I’ll handle things here. Go find the bastard.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mom took the little girl’s hand. “Let’s go find your teacher.”

“Kay.”

“I’ll check the inside of the bus,” Julie said.

Nodding, I picked up Bobby’s backpack. “Dammit. There’s blood on it.”

“Bus is clear. If he harmed Bobby, I’ll...” Julie’s voice trailed off.

I scowled. “The bastard only has a five-minute head start.”

“I’ll check west,” Julie said and disappeared down an alley.

I yelled after her, “If I see them, I’ll do the howl.”

“Gotcha.”

A child’s shriek caught my attention. I bolted around the building and spotted a big, white guy with greasy black hair and filthy clothing carrying Bobby down the sidewalk. Bobby was struggling wildly. “Let go! Let go of me!”

I raced after them and howled like a coyote.

Julie’s answering yips echoed off the buildings.

The kidnapper glanced over his shoulder, took one look at me and bolted.

I increased my speed and shouted. “Put the kid down or I will shoot you dead!”

The kidnapper hurled Bobby into the roadway. Brakes squealed as people swerved to miss him.

“Shit!” I slid over a hood, scooped Bobby up and jumped back as a speeding motorcycle whizzed by.

A fire truck skidded to a stop, blocking the roadway.

I let out a shuddering breath of relief and hugged Bobby. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

“I want my mommy,” Bobby sobbed.

“I know little guy. I know.”

In the distance sirens sounded.

“I’ll get the bastard,” Julie yelled as she ran by.

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Three firemen escorted us over to a bus stop. “Were either of you hit by a car?”

“No. My injuries happened earlier in the day. Bobby has some nasty road rash and bruises.”

The fire captain demanded, “Are you on any kind of medication, ma’am?”

“Seriously? I don’t have time for this shit. Some asshole kidnapped the kid and threw him in the roadway.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out my badge and ID.

“Sorry, Deputy.”

“His name is Bobby, and his teacher is at Cerreta’s. Guard him with your life, I need to help my partner.” I chased after Julie. She was about a block ahead of me and closing on the suspect.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a silver truck. Huh, kinda looked like Dad’s, but that wasn’t possible. He was still dealing with the explosion.

The suspect hopped over a five-foot-high block wall and started screaming.

Julie boosted herself up and straddled the fence. “I’ll be damned.”

“Dog?”

A laugh escaped Julie. “Jumping cactus.”

“That I have to see.” I peered over the wall.

The kidnapper was face down on a three-foot-tall cholla cactus. Dozens of the porcupine-like joints were attached to his face and body. It would take a visit to the emergency room to remove the fish-hook spines.

“What in the bloody hell is going on?” Dad barked.

I gaped at him. “What are you doing here?”

“Answer the question,” Dante snapped.

Yeow! Someone was in a bad mood. “We needed some chocolate, stopped at Cerreta’s and that asshole stole a kid. When I gave chase, he threw Bobby in the roadway and jumped over this fence. Which turned out to be a really bad idea,” I replied.

Dad glanced at the paramedics treating Bobby. “How badly is he hurt?”

“Road rash and some bruises,” I answered.

The kidnapper shrieked, “I’m stuck. Get me some fucking help.”

“Not a chance,” Julie snarled.

Dante looked over the fence and grimaced. “I’ll go get the paramedics.” He jogged down the sidewalk.

“Those hose jockeys thought I was high on something,” I grouched.

Dad examined my battered face. “When you’re in your warrior’s mode, you do come

across as a bit crazy.”

“So? I had to save Bobby.”

Dad hugged me gently. “I know.”

A Glendale PD patrol car pulled up and a Hispanic officer built like a tank got out.

“About damn time you got here, Mario,” Julie grumbled.

Mario’s eyebrows shot up. “Lost another fight, did ya?”

“Har. Har.”

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“I need some fucking help,” the kidnapper screamed.

Julie smiled at him, “Think of it as God’s retribution. You won’t be molesting any kids for a while.”

“Police brutality! Police brutality!”

Mario glared at the cactus-covered suspect. “Shut the hell up and if I were you, I’d quit thrashing around like that.”

“Fuck off!” The kidnapper somehow managed to roll off the cholla and ended up face down on the landscaping gravel. “Hot! Hot! It’s burning me! It’s burning me!”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s a hundred and ten today and did you think of that when you threw Bobby in the street?”

“You are a fucking bitch,” he hollered.

The paramedics hurried up with their gear. “Where’s the patient?”

“On the other side of this fence.” Julie held out her cell phone. “As you can see, he landed on a cholla cactus and is covered in spines.”

One of the paramedics let out a whistle. “Moving him is going to be difficult.”

“Yep. The side gate is unlocked,” Julie advised.

The kidnapper shrieked, “I need some fucking help. Now!”

The paramedics hurried around to the gate.

Dad plucked Julie off the fence. “Let’s go get your chocolate and then you’re all going straight home. No more stops.”

“Yes, sir.” Julie gave me the side eye.

I shrugged. I guess we wouldn’t tell them we planned on hitting Caramba too.

Dante dropped an arm over my shoulder. “Where else were you stopping?”

“Caramba.”

“I’m riding back with you,” Dante announced. “With your luck, you’ll walk into an armed robbery.”

I glared at him. “We aren’t helpless females. We are highly trained police officers and full-fledged members of the Alpha Dogs.”

“That’s true, but you’re injured. Until you’re back in fighting shape, it’s my job to keep you safe.” Dante pressed a hot kiss on my mouth.

My anger faded away. “That’s cheating.”

“But I like kissing you.” Dante gave me a devilish grin.

God, I loved his dimples.

A patrol car stopped next to us and the passengers’ window slid down revealing

Sergeant Durham's stern face. "I had a chat with Sergeant Bergman about you two poaching our calls."

"Poaching? We were just at the wrong place, at the right time," Julie protested.

Dad nodded sadly. "Poaching other department's calls is a serious violation of police ethics."

"Aw, c'mon. That's not true, and besides, we didn't make the arrest, Mario did," I said.

Durham raised an eyebrow. "Like I said. Poaching."

Cursing at the top of his lungs, the kidnapper walked slowly down the sidewalk.

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I grinned. Only his feet were free of cactus spines. He looked like something out of a horror movie.

“You fucking bitch, you think this is funny?” The kidnapper screeched.

“No, I think it’s justice.”

Howling in rage, he lunged at me.

Dante kicked him off his feet and Mario tased him at the same time.

The kidnapper landed on a prickly pear cactus and howled in pain.

“Karma’s a bitch,” I said.

“Fuck off!”

Dante urged us down the sidewalk. “Let’s go get your chocolate.”

“Get me some French Mint. I need to give Sergeant Durham an update on the explosion,” Dad said.

I nodded. “And it was the damn chickens’ fault that everything went kablooeey.”

Dad rolled his eyes.

Chapter Six

I emailed the results of the last background check to Dad's computer. Thankfully, it had only taken us two days to finish them. Now, Julie and I were going to the mall for a pedicure and some shopping.

My grim-faced father hurried into the control center and handed me a thumb drive in a plastic evidence bag. "The ID techs are overwhelmed, and I need all the fingerprints we collected run through our database immediately."

I gaped at him in horror. Spider webs with a mortuary of dead creepy crawlies decorated Dad's hair, and his clothes were covered in gooey black mud. "Good, God." I waved my hand in front of my face. "It smells like you've been rolling in shit."

"No kidding." Julie grabbed a fly swatter and walloped the hell out of the horde of flies buzzing around Dad's chest.

Dad gave her the stink eye.

I bit my lower lip to keep from laughing. Fly guts now littered his grimy shirt. "What happened?"

Dad seized my water bottle and drained it. "We were checking Chuck's outhouse for more explosives."

Julie wrinkled her nose. "That explains the smell."

"Why does Chuck have an outhouse?" Call me curious.

Dad wiped at the sweat rolling down his face, smearing the gunk around. "Who knows. I think it's been there since 1850."

“So, did you find more explosives buried in the shit?” Julie handed him her water bottle.

Wrapping his cruddy fingers around the plastic, Dad nodded. “We did. Along with a canister of Cobalt-60.” He emptied the water bottle.

A cold chill ran up my back. “They’re trying to build a dirty bomb!”

“They are and Chuck refuses to answer any of our questions.”

I carefully cleaned the evidence bag with a wet wipe and handed the box to Dad. “Use them. Please. We’ll start running the fingerprints.”

“No offense, sir, but what you need is a long, hot shower.” Julie smacked another fly.

Dad shuddered. “You should see Dante. The toilet seat in the outhouse broke and he took a header into the gunk.”

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“Oh, my God!” I shot to my feet. “Where is he?”

“The firefighters washed him down and the paramedics took him to the emergency room to get checked over,” Dad answered.

I grabbed my purse. “Which hospital?”

Dad held up his hand. “Dante has been quarantined until they get the test results back. You can’t see him.”

“Was he exposed to the Cobalt-60? Julie asked.

“We’re not sure. Get started on the fingerprints.”

Fear knotting my stomach, I sank down on my chair. “When will the doctors know if he was contaminated?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

I grabbed my cellphone. “I’ll call him.”

“Dante’s phone is buried in the outhouse sludge. He’ll call you when he can,” Dad said.

I didn’t like the look in Dad’s eyes. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“When he fell, a piece of wood from the toilet seat impaled his shoulder. Doc

Halliday is handling the surgery. He said the wound needs to be properly cleaned out and stitched.”

Julie grabbed my hand and squeezed. “Dante’s going to be okay.” Her gaze was fixed on Dad’s face. “Right?”

“The wound will have to be monitored for infection and the canister of Cobalt-60 seemed intact.”

Mom rushed into the command center and dumped her purse on my desk. “Great news! I just talked with the head nurse. Dante’s surgery went well. Pops ran a Geiger counter over him and found no signs of radiation poisoning.”

I let out a breath of relief and the knot in my stomach loosened.

Miss Kitty climbed out of the purse and batted my pen around. I ruffled her fur. “Thanks, Mom.”

“How in the hell did that bastard get into the recovery room?” Dad demanded.

Mom shrugged. “Pops doesn’t share his plans with me.”

The Command Center’s phone rang. Dad grabbed it before I could. “Alpha Dogs.” Dad’s eyes narrowed. “I see. It won’t happen again, Doc.” He hung up the phone. “You did your crazy granny act and used that damn cat as a distraction.”

“Gemma needed answers, and I got them.”

“And I appreciate it, Mom.” I cleaned the muck off the phone.

“The cat has to go,” Dad stated firmly.

Julie, Mom and I gave Dad the stink eye.

“Bodacious will trample it,” Dad growled.

“Miss Kitty is part of our family,” Mom snapped. “Live with it or learn to sleep on the couch.”

Dad shot back testily, “It won’t be me sleeping on the couch.”

“Wanna bet? And you stink bad enough to make a skunk puke,” Mom returned sweetly.

I jumped to my feet. “God, do I need to pee.”

“Me too,” Julie said.

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Mom and Dad yelled in unison, “Sit down.”

We sat.

“Bedroom now,” Dad ordered, yanking the door open.

Mom stomped past him with Miss Kitty on her heels.

“Get to work,” Dad instructed and slammed the door.

I let out a whistle. “Holy cow! I haven’t seen them this worked up in a while.”

“Me, neither. You don’t think they’re gonna...” Julie grimaced. “You know, do it?”

“As bad as he smells. No way.” I inserted the thumb drive and sighed. “We have fifty prints to run.”

“Send me half and once we’re done, we can sneak into Dante’s room.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I sent Julie her half and started running the fingerprints through the database. Two had outstanding DUI warrants, three had arrest records for theft, but most of the prints belonged to hardened felons with long criminal histories ranging from assault to attempted murder to gunrunning and cattle rustling. I sent those to Dad’s computer.

“Holy hell! The CIA just locked up my computer,” Julie cried.

“What?” I slid my chair over to her console. Crap! A red warning bar flashed at the top of the screen. Evidently, we were in violation of all sorts of espionage laws, and we needed to call the number listed immediately. Whoever Eric Roberts was, the CIA wanted him badly.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Julie’s fingers flew across the keyboard. “They’re trying to breach our mainframe.”

I grabbed a thumb drive Mom called The Hail Mary and inserted it into my computer. The red warning bar appeared at the top of my screen too and gobbledygook scrolled across the screen. “Crap! The Hail Mary isn’t working.”

An alarm sounded and a mechanical voice announced. “Breach imminent! Breach imminent!”

“I can’t shut it down! I can’t shut it down!” Julie yelled.

Typing frantically, I accessed our mainframe and tried to block the malware infiltrating our system. “This bastard is good.”

Wearing only a towel, Dad burst into the room and hit the main power switch. The lights died. Thirty seconds later, the backup generator kicked in.

He glared at us. “What did you do?”

“Us?” I bristled. “Nothing. We were running the fingerprints through the database like you wanted and wham! The CIA was trying to breach our computers. It seems they’re really interested in some dude named Eric Roberts.”

Loathing filled Mom’s voice, “Eric Roberts? Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I eyed Mom in alarm, not only was she sopping wet, but her melting mascara gave her a scary, killer clown mask. “Who is he?”

Dad rubbed a hand over his face, trying to hide his smile. “He’s a rogue CIA agent who tried to kill us thirty years ago.”

“This time he won’t come back from the dead,” Mom promised darkly, ignoring the water dripping off her.

Okay, Mom had to get rid of her killer clown look. I handed her the box of wipes and gestured to her face. She ignored me. Mentally throwing my hands up in disgust, I interjected, “I think the question is: Where has he been hiding for all these years and why is he back now?”

“Revenge. We need to warn the others,” Mom said, tapping away on her cellphone. “I sent a Defcon One alert.”

Dad nodded. “And we need to prepare for a visit from the CIA or their FBI attack dogs.”

Miss Kitty trotted into the room and meowed.

Dad stomped his feet and yelled, “Git!”

Miss Kitty hissed at him.

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Dad scowled at her and failed to notice his towel was slipping.

Julie's eyes bugged. "Ummm, sir, your..."

Mom fixed her serial killer stare on Dad. "She stays."

"For God's sake Dad, go put some pants on. We don't want to see your junk," I exclaimed loudly. Lordy, I hoped that worked.

Horror filled Dad's eyes. He grabbed the towel as it slid down his abdomen and color flooded his face. "Sorry." In full retreat, he backed toward the door. "I'll go change. I never meant. I would never..."

Huh? I never knew my dad could blush like that.

He bolted down the hallway.

Miss Kitty chased after him.

Yay, fight averted for now.

"Go away, furball." The bedroom door slammed.

"Wow, he's got a nice ass," Julie sighed, then flashed Mom an appalled look. "Not that I was looking or anything."

"He does have a great ass," Mom agreed and smiled at me. "Clever move, Gemma."

I put the box of wet wipes in her hand. “We’ve got bigger problems than Miss Kitty. Who is Eric Roberts and why does he want you dead?”

“At one time Roberts was your grandfather’s CIA boss. He took one look at me and decided I would become his mistress. I declined his offer. He tried to rape me, and I kicked his ass.”

A growl escaped Julie. “I hope you did some serious damage to his dangly bits.”

“I did. He couldn’t get it up for a year.”

From Mom’s grim expression I knew Roberts had retaliated. “Did he put a hit out on you?”

“In a way. I was blackmailed into becoming an off-the-books Army sniper called the Scorpion. Roberts sent me on missions behind enemy lines, alone. His plan was to make things so awful that I would agree to have sex with him.”

“Then Dad came along and made you part of his team,” I said gleefully.

Mom wiped the crud off her face. “That he did.”

“Didn’t your father try to stop him?” Julie wanted to know.

“Pops had his own problems. Roberts accused him of treason and put him on a kill list. What Roberts didn’t know was that Pops had a microdot with enough evidence to put him behind bars for the next hundred years. I swiped the microdot to use as leverage.”

“Which then put a bullseye on your chest,” I inserted.

A humorless laugh broke from Mom. “It did. The jackass tried to kill us repeatedly.”

“What finally stopped him?” Julie’s eyes were filled with anger.

Mom shook her head. “We’re not sure. At first, we thought Roberts had died in a bomb blast, but then we got intel that he had survived and was hiding out in Mexico. We were never able to track him down.”

“This time, we finish the job.” Every inch the Alpha Dogs’ commander Dad was dressed in a black jumpsuit complete with combat boots and weapons belt. “Get this little harpy off my back.” With a grimace, Dad turned around.

A giggle escaped me. Miss Kitty was clinging to his back.

Mom removed her. “Get your own man.”

“I think she likes you, sir,” Julie chortled.

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Dad shrugged nonchalantly. “Most females do.”

I rolled my eyes. Modesty wasn’t Dad’s strong suit.

“And all that macho swagger got passed down to your brothers,” Julie whispered.

I whispered back, “Unfortunately.” The men in my family were too damn pretty and women did all sorts of creepy things to catch their attention.

“I summoned Jaspar. Hopefully, he can get our computers up and running today,” Mom advised, totally oblivious to the growing puddle of water at her feet.

I handed her a roll of paper towels and tried to log into our security systems, but nothing happened. “Shit! The cameras are down too.”

“I’ll go to the barn and boot up the backup systems,” Julie said.

“Go with her, Gemma,” Mom ordered. “If Roberts is in Arizona, he has the ranch under surveillance.”

I grabbed my earpiece and popped it in my left ear. “Why hasn’t he attacked?”

“I don’t know and that worries me.” Mom rubbed her hair with a paper towel.

Julie snorted. “If he was the one who hired Chuck to make bombs, he’s either low on money or manpower or desperate.”

Implacable resolve stamped on his face, Dad growled, “Doesn’t matter. This time he’s going down.”

“I’d like to be a fly on the wall when he discovers chickens were responsible for blowing his plans all to hell,” I snickered.

Dad gave me the look.

“While I’m out there, I’ll feed the critters too,” I added hurriedly.

“Move Bodacious and Max into the barn. We don’t want them getting shot,” Mom ordered.

I nodded. “Will do.” The separate backup system was in a hardened bunker beneath the barn. Dad believed in being prepared for the worst and we even had seven years of food and weapons stored in the bunker.

Chapter Seven

Julie and I quickly changed our flip-flops for tennis shoes. The only person I knew who could fight while wearing flip-flops was Mom.

“Keep your weapons concealed and act harmless,” Dad instructed.

I giggled like an overcaffeinated teenager. “How’s that?”

Mom winced. “That’s guaranteed to scare off anything with a penis.” The puddle at Mom’s feet was getting larger and larger.

“That is the idea.” I grabbed my Glock out of the desk drawer and stuck it in the back of my jeans.

Julie did the same. “What kind of men did Roberts hire in the Middle East?”

“A mixture of well-trained mercenaries with a few idiots thrown in,” Dad answered.

I grinned. “Lucky us. Most of his idiots are either dead or locked up. None of the prints we ran came back to criminal masterminds.”

“You didn’t run all of the prints,” Dad pointed out.

My shoulders sagged. “True.”

“Now we have to worry about the CIA and their FBI attack dogs too,” Julie grouched.

My eyes widened in horror. “Have you told Grandpa Reynolds yet?”

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Dad scowled. “Not until we have to.”

“I’ll get a drone up and see how many Peeping Toms we have.” Mom’s tennis shoes squeaked loudly as she walked over to the armory.

I grimaced. “You might want to change first.”

“It’s 115 today. I’ll be dry within ten minutes.”

Julie and I exchanged looks and headed down the hallway.

Miss Kitty followed us into the kitchen.

“No, no, little one. The big, nasty bull might step on you. You need to stay in the house.” Julie pushed Miss Kitty back with her foot and quickly closed the kitchen door.

Halfway across the patio and I was already sweating badly. 115 my ass.

Angry meows sounded.

I glanced over my shoulder. The kitten gave us her death stare through the kitchen window.

Julie laughed. “She’s got your mother’s stink eye down pat.”

“That she does.”

Max, Dad's cutting horse, knickered at me as we crossed the backyard. "Hang on. I'm gonna feed you."

"The back of my neck is itching," Julie announced.

I smiled brightly. "We're probably under surveillance. Why don't you do your seductress routine at the pool, and I'll head to the barn and start the backup systems."

"What? Your boobs are as big as mine," Julie protested.

"But I'm not a homecoming queen like you are."

"Oh, puh-lease, that was a million years ago and what about those sexy dance numbers you do with Dante?"

Julie had a valid point. "Okay. Rock, paper, scissors?"

"Don't cheat this time," Julie said.

I rolled my eyes. "You can't cheat with rock, paper, scissors."

"You always win."

"Do not." I wiped the sweat out of my eyes. "Can we just do this?"

"Fine."

Together, we yelled, "Rock, paper, scissors, Shoot!"

"Rock!" My bruised fist still looked like I had been in a brawl.

Julie's hand was closed except for the middle and index fingers.

I hooted. "Rock beats scissors."

"Damn. Next time we see who can spit the farthest."

Snickering, I asked, "Did you forget I was raised with five brothers?"

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Julie threw her hands up in disgust. “You had spitting contests?”

“We did.”

“No wonder you’re so weird,” Julie huffed.

I grinned. “And you fit in so well.”

“I do, don’t I?” Julie strutted over to the pool and kicked off her shoes.

“Work it,” I yelled.

Julie gave me the one-fingered salute and began a sensuous stretching routine.

A flash of light caught my eye. Yep, we had some Peeping Toms on the hill to the south of us. I bet they were enjoying the show.

Acting like I didn’t have a care in the world, I strolled into the barn. Max knickered at me. “Hold on, buddy.” My cellphone rang. “Stone.”

“I’ve got a drone up,” Mom said.

I hurried into the tack room. “I think we’ve got some Peeping Toms to the south.”

“I’ll check it out.” Mom laughed. “But I can assure you all their eyes are fixed on Julie. She could make a fortune at the Showgirls’ Cabaret.”

Julie's voice sounded in my earpiece. "Just imagine the expression on Sergeant Bergman's face if I told him I had gotten a part-time job there."

"Hoo boy! He would have a meltdown of biblical proportions."

Mom let out an exasperated hiss. "Miss Kitty got loose."

"How did that happen?" Moving an old-fashioned porch light to the right, I watched as a panel opened, revealing a high-tech sensor pad.

"She followed me up on the roof and climbed down the bougainvillea."

"Miss Kitty is heading my way. I'll keep an eye on her," Julie promised.

I placed my hand on the sensor pad and presto! The floor slid back to reveal a staircase. "How long before we get some backup, Mom?"

"Twenty to thirty minutes. Your dad just received intel that the CIA and their FBI attack dogs are sending a tactical team to secure the ranch."

I shook my head in disbelief. "You would think after our last encounter; they wouldn't pull another dumbass stunt like that." Taking the steps two at a time, I rushed over to the control panel and typed in the passcode.

"Wait a minute, I thought the CIA were only allowed to work overseas," Julie interjected.

"They'll have fake FBI credentials," Mom replied.

"Why didn't they simply call us and ask how we got Robert's print," I grouched.

Mom snorted. “The CIA are a paranoid bunch.”

Data filled the screen. “C’mon. C’mon. We are sitting ducks right now.” The start-up screen finally appeared, and I typed in the passcode.

“We have two hostiles climbing over the fence by the orange grove,” Mom warned.

Dad growled in my earpiece, “I’ve got them.”

The cameras finally came online. “Copy that. They’re dressed like cowboy wannabes and surveillance is live.”

I winced as Dad kicked the living shit out of them. Wowzers, when Dad went into his berserker mode, you stayed the hell out of his way. I quickly checked the cameras for more uninvited guests. “Julie, two more hostiles are at the side gate.”

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Julie laughed. “Yep, I see them. The idiots are wearing bandanas over their faces like old West outlaws.” She waved at them all friendly-like. “Hey, y’all want a beer?”

The cowboy with a huge beer belly yelled, “Hell, yeah.” He hurried toward Julie.

His buddy reminded me of a scarecrow complete with overalls. His wild, blonde hair stuck out from his hat and pieces of straw and what looked like manure covered his boots. He grabbed Beer Belly’s arm and stopped him. “No, the boss won’t like it.”

“It’s ice-cold fellas and I’m feeling mighty lonely,” Julie called, giving them a come-hither look.

Beer Belly asked, “You’re alone?”

“Not anymore.” Julie held out a beer. “What’s your name, big guy?”

Taking a quick look around, the morons holstered their weapons and headed for Julie.

“On my way, Julie.”

“Copy.”

Running up the stairs, I secured the bunker and snuck around the side of the barn.

Bodacious and Max followed me.

“No. No. No.” I waved my hands and whispered, “Shoo go away.”

Bodacious butted his head against my back.

I hit the side of the barn. “Knock it off, you overgrown cow.”

“Get your hands up or I’ll put a bullet in you,” Julie shouted.

Miss Kitty yowled.

Beer Belly yelled, “Get that fucking cat off me!”

“Don’t you dare hurt her!”

The bastard snarled, “Let’s see if it can swim.”

“Oh crap.” I grabbed a shovel and charged around the barn in time to see Julie diving into the pool. “How about you pick on someone your own size.”

Beer Belly spun around.

I brained him with the shovel.

He staggered back a foot.

Bellowing loudly, Bodacious slammed into Beer Belly and sent him flying head over heels. He hit the pool with a loud splash and sank to the bottom.

Julie popped up, holding Miss Kitty.

“Fuck!” Scarecrow pulled his gun.

I kicked it out of his hand and ten seconds later, Bodacious head butted him.

Scarecrow was thrown a good five feet and landed in Mom's prized rose garden.

"He's a dead man," Mom growled in my ear.

To my astonishment, Scarecrow scrambled to his feet and took off at a dead run with Bodacious in hot pursuit. Oh shit! The bull was trampling the rose bushes.

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Mom added, “And that bull is getting neutered.”

“You can keep the damn cat.” Dad galloped past me, riding Max without a saddle or bridle. He pulled the Taser off his gun belt and zapped Scarecrow. The outlaw dropped like a rock.

My Dad was such a badass.

Using just his knees for control, Dad had Max turn Bodacious back toward the barn and block all his attempts to attack Scarecrow again.

Bodacious bellowed in fury as he was forced into the corral.

“A little help here,” Julie gasped. “He weighs a ton.”

I spun around. Julie was holding Beer Belly’s head above the water and Miss Kitty was gnawing on his ear. “Mean little thing, isn’t she?”

Julie grinned. “With a little training, she’ll put a K-9 to shame.”

“That she will.” I grunted as I tried to pull Beer Belly out. He had to weigh four hundred pounds.

Dad slid off Max and helped us pull the outlaw out of the water.

“Thanks, Dad. Got any cuffs?” Max snuffled my hair. “Okay. Okay. I’ll get you some oats in minute.”

Max tossed his head and snorted.

“Enough Max,” Dad said as he rolled our prisoner over, and zip tied his hands.

Max snuffled his hair.

Growling menacingly, Miss Kitty kept chewing Beer Belly’s ear.

“You’ll do, Miss Kitty.” Dad ruffled her fur. “You’ll do.”

Miss Kitty stared at Dad with love in her eyes. Meow.

“And another female bites the dust,” Julie muttered.

Dad smirked and put Miss Kitty on his shoulder.

A patrol car skidded to a stop by the side gate and Frank got out.

“Frank,” I shouted and pointed at Scarecrow who was crawling away. “Cuff him.”

He nodded.

Scarecrow struggled to his feet.

With one well-placed kick, Frank knocked him down and quickly cuffed him.

A tall, muscular man in his forties walked through the gate.

I scowled. If Agent Grimes was here, his tactical team wouldn’t be far behind.

Instead of a suit and tie, he was wearing a blue polo shirt with the FBI emblem on his

left shoulder, I drew down on him. “That’s far enough Agent Grimes.”

He raised his hands. “Is this really necessary?”

“Where are your CIA buddies?” Julie snapped.

Grimes shrugged. “Around.” He rolled Scarecrow over with his foot. “I’ll be damned. Jethro Pattee. He’s wanted for armed robbery and cattle rustling.”

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“We believe he’s working for Eric Roberts,” Dad said, holstering his gun.

I lowered my weapon. “The dumbasses just attacked us. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“My men caught a few of them.” Grimes wiped at the sweat rolling down his face. “It’s hotter than hell out here. Why don’t we go inside your office, Alex, and discuss the situation.” Grimes said.

Dad’s left eyebrow rose when Grimes used his first name. “Sure, Hawke, but first, I’ve got two more prisoners hogtied in the orange grove.”

“Smith and Jones can handle them.” Agent Grimes let out a loud whistle and two men in tactical gear walked through the gate. He pointed to the hogtied prisoners. “Bring them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Patrol cars from almost every department in the area pulled into the parking lot.

Julie and I exchanged grins. For once, the cavalry had arrived in the nick of time. Grimes and his tactical team were outnumbered. I pulled on Beer Belly’s arm. “C’mon, get up.”

“I’m not going to jail!”

“Yeah, you are,” Julie stated firmly.

Beer Belly jumped to his feet and ran for the gate, dragging us with him.

Shit, the guy was strong. I kicked his feet out from under him.

Beer Belly staggered off-balance and fell, taking Julie with him.

“Get him off me. Get him off me,” Julie cried. Her face was pressed against his armpit.

Agent Grimes and Dad dragged Beer Belly away from her.

Julie scrambled to her feet. “Oh, my, God. You smell like a rotting corpse. When is the last time you took a bath?”

“Dunno.”

Dad leaned down and growled, “Get up now or I’ll let the bull have another go at you.”

Right on cue, Bodacious bellowed.

Beer Belly shot to his feet. “Don’t do that! Don’t do that!”

Dad took one arm, and Agent Grimes took the other and off they went.

Max trotted up and started herding me toward the barn.

“Okay. Okay. I’m going.” I patted his shoulder. “You are one pushy horse.”

Max whinnied, opened the gate with his nose and trotted to his stall.

“I’ll feed Max. Bodacious is all yours,” Julie said.

Bodacious kicked the corral gate.

“I’m coming. I’m coming.” I grabbed a bucket of oats and poured it in his trough.

Bodacious chowed down like he hadn’t eaten in a year.

Using a pitchfork, Julie dropped some hay next to the oats.

The bull snorted at her.

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“What?” Julie asked.

“He wants more hay.”

Julie dumped more alfalfa into his trough.

I brushed the dirt off my jeans. “I say, we clean up a bit and go visit Dante.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

We walked back to the house.

Chapter Eight

Grabbing bottled water out of the refrigerator, we headed for our bedroom.

Mom’s irritated voice sounded in my earpiece. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To visit Dante.”

“I need you to man the control room.”

“Dad has the trespassers locked up and the computers are still down,” I shot back.

“The cameras aren’t. We have too many strangers wandering around. I don’t know who is legit and who isn’t. Hell, Roberts could even be here.”

Damn. She was right. I was letting my overwhelming need to see Dante obliterate my common sense. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Jasper’s ETA is ten minutes.”

I took a seat at the command console. “Yes, ma’am.”

“You’ll be able to visit Dante tonight,” Mom added.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Julie frowned. “Jasper gives me the creeps.”

“I know. His hair looks like he stuck his finger in a light socket.”

Julie threw her hands up. “And how can he walk with his pants hanging down around his knees.”

“I’m just glad his tee-shirt is knee-length. His hairy butt is a turn off.”

Mom’s amused voice sounded in my ear. “He just pulled up, girls. Be nice to him, we need the computers up and running.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Julie and I said in unison.

The doorbell rang.

I cocked an eyebrow. “Rock, paper, scissors?”

“Not a chance. It’s your turn.”

The doorbell rang again.

“Fine.” I got up and hurried down the hallway.

Jasper banged on the front door. “Hello?”

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“I’m coming.” I opened the door, and my jaw dropped. A nice-looking kid with neatly trimmed hair and blue coveralls stood there. “Jasper?”

He nodded.

“You’ve changed. A lot.”

Jasper grinned broadly. “Marie said to grow my business I needed to look more professional.”

“Marie?”

“My wife.”

“You got married? I exclaimed.

“I did.”

Julie said in my earpiece. “What is he? Sixteen?”

“Twenty,” Mom supplied.

“Congratulations.” I opened the door wider. “C’mon back and we’ll let you get to work.”

An FBI tactical officer was suddenly standing there. “Let me see some ID.”

I pushed Jasper behind me and studied the officer. Not particularly tall, but well-muscled and his high-pitched voice made me want to laugh. “No, but I’d like to see yours.”

“Show me your ID or I will arrest both of you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. It sounded like he had been snorting helium. “Not gonna happen.” I cocked my head. “Are all CIA agents as stupid as you are?”

The tactical officer bristled. “I’m an FBI agent.”

Julie was suddenly standing beside me. “How about we contact Agent Grimes and see if he knows you.”

“Your father is coming,” Mom advised in my ear.

The tactical officer’s hand dropped to his gun.

“I don’t care what you have been snorting, but if you pull that gun, you’re a dead man,” I warned.

The officer bared his teeth in a fierce grin. “You think you can outdraw me?”

Within the blink of the eye, I had my gun pointed at his face. “I know I can.”

“I heard you were a fast draw artist like your mother.” The officer slowly raised his hands.

Dad and Agent Grimes ran across the backyard.

“I don’t think he should be allowed to procreate,” Julie said. Her pistol was pointed at

his groin. “Do you?”

I cocked my Glock. “Nope.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” the tactical officer squeaked.

Dad jabbed the muzzle of his gun against the tactical officer’s neck. “Yes, they would.”

“Stand down, Dodson,” Agent Grimes commanded, relieving him of his gun.

I lowered my weapon. “Please tell me he’s not one of your agents.”

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“He’s not,” Grimes said.

I looked Dodson dead in the eye. “You pull another stunt like this, and I will shoot you.” I took a step back and Julie shut the door in his face. “C’mon Jasper, you’ve got a computer to fix.”

“Is it always this exciting?”

“Unfortunately,” Julie said.

I turned around and froze. Grandpa Reynolds stood in the kitchen doorway. He was dressed like an FBI tactical officer and his sniper rifle was held casually against his chest. Holy hell, this wasn’t good. “Does Mom or Dad know you’re here, Grandpa?”

Mom cursed in my ear.

“They do now.”

Julie smiled nervously and dragged Jasper down the hallway. “Let’s get that computer fixed.”

Dad slowly opened the front door, and his furious gaze locked on Grandpa Reynolds.

One glance at the gun in his hand and I stepped in front of Grandpa. “We need him alive, Dad.”

“I know.” Dad holstered his gun. “Grimes has intel that Roberts is in Arizona and has

rebuilt his crime syndicate.”

Grandpa Reynolds’ eyes narrowed in speculation. “Hard evidence or just rumors?”

“Hard evidence.”

Something dark and predatory flashed across Grandpa’s face. “I want to see it.”

“Agent Grimes is waiting in my office. The evidence is on his laptop.”

“Let’s go.” Grandpa Reynolds walked out the front door.

His hands balled into fists; Dad followed him.

I blew out a relieved breath. They hadn’t tried to kill each other. Yet.

Mom walked past me. “I need a beer.”

“Me too.”

Julie added in my earpiece, “We’re thirsty too.”

“Light beer or regular?” I asked.

“I’ll take a peach beer and Jaspar wants bottled water.”

I opened the refrigerator. “Gotcha.”

Mom’s cellphone rang. “Hello. Your father told you to do what? A barbecue? Are you kidding me?” She rolled her eyes. “Fine but I don’t think we have enough food on hand. Okay. Okay. I’ll see what I can do.” Mom disconnected and muttered, “That

man has lost his mind.”

“Grandpa is making him all twitchy,” I replied.

“Your father thinks a barbecue will lower the aggression levels.”

“He’s probably right, but there has to be at least forty people here.”

A humorless laugh broke from Mom. “Including the deputies, there are fifty-two mouths to feed. And the kicker is: Pops is gonna park his RV in our pasture.”

“What? Are you serious?”

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Mom drained her beer. “Whatever evidence Grimes showed them is bad. Really bad.”

“Sounds like Armageddon is coming to Arizona.”

“Armageddon is already here,” Mom snarled.

I opened the chest freezer and frowned. “We don’t have enough hamburger patties to feed that many people.”

“Hell.” Mom moved stuff around. “You’re right.”

A sudden idea hit me. “How about Bitsie? She owes the Alpha Dogs a favor and she has three food trucks.”

“And she can handle herself in a fight,” Mom exclaimed. “Call her and see if she is available.”

“On it.”

Chapter Nine

By the time Jasper got the computers up and running, Bitsie’s food trucks had arrived. Keeping track of all the people in the compound was a nightmare.

A flash of movement caught my eye. Crap! “Dodson is at it again, Dad.”

“What’s he trying to get into this time?” Dad growled.

“Mom’s helicopter and the hangar.”

Grandpa’s voice sounded in my ear. “I’ll deal with him.”

“It’s time Dodson left,” Dad stated.

Grandpa stepped out of his RV. “I agree. Let’s see how fast he can run.”

Julie shot me a worried look. “You don’t think they’re letting Bodacious out, do you?”

“Yep.”

“But he’ll attack your grandfather too.”

I shook my head. “Nope. Bodacious is afraid of Grandpa.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. He actually ran from him.”

Julie frowned. “Huh? Imagine that.”

I zoomed in on Dodson. “Our CIA agent just put a tracker on the chopper.”

“I bet that snotwad has planted listening devices all over the place too,” Julie huffed indignantly.

Mom chuckled. “Logan is retrieving the bugs.”

“For a CIA agent he’s not very good at blending in,” Lucas interjected.

“He has never done field work before,” Grandpa said.

I shook my head in disgust. Dodson was too busy trying to pick the lock on the hangar to notice Grandpa approaching him. “And it shows.”

“He’s not very good at picking locks, either,” Julie commented.

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Grandpa stopped behind Dodson. “How fast can you run?”

Dodson stiffened and casually placed his hand on the butt of his gun.

“Can you run faster than 1,200 feet per second? In case you didn’t know, that’s the average speed of a 9mm bullet fired from my gun,” Grandpa warned.

Dodson raised his hands.

“Turn around. Slowly.”

His teeth bared in a snarl; Dodson complied. “I’m going to have you arrested for assault with a deadly weapon,”

“And we’ll charge you with espionage, treason and gunrunning.”

His left eye twitched. “You can’t prove any of that.”

“Yes, we can. With two fingers, slowly take your weapon out and drop it on the ground,” Grandpa instructed.

Dodson complied.

“Bodacious is heading your way, Grandpa,” I warned.

A nasty smile curved Grandpa’s mouth and he holstered his gun. “I hate paperwork. If you can outrun that bull, you are free to go.”

“Piece of cake.” Dodson sprinted for the gate.

Bellowing loudly, Bodacious charged after him.

“Dang, he can really run,” Julie gasped.

“Gotta say, I’m impressed.” I adjusted the camera’s focus.

Lucas climbed onto the gate and yelled, “Sic ’em Bodacious.”

“Are you crazy? That bull is trying to kill me! Shoot it!” Dodson dived to one side and barely avoided Bodacious’s deadly hooves.

A crowd gathered at the fence to watch the chase.

I shook my head in disbelief. Some of the guys were placing bets.

“Enough is enough,” Mom said in my ear. “Gemma put Bodacious back in his corral.”

“Yes. ma’am.” I looked over at Julie. “The console is all yours.”

“Got it.” Julie winced. “You better hurry. Dodson is tiring.”

I bolted out of the command center and crashed into my brother Nate.

“What’s the hurry?”

I darted around him and called over my shoulder, “They sic’d Bodacious on that CIA agent.”

“So?”

“If Bodacious hurts the idiot, the livestock investigators might insist on putting him down.” I bolted out the back door and sprinted for the barn.

Nate ran alongside me. “Dad would be pissed. He loves that bull.”

“Yep.” Grabbing a bucket, I hurried into the feed room and filled it with oats.

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My brother opened the corral gate and stood behind it. “Good luck.”

I walked into the pasture and hollered, “Bodacious! Oats!”

He skidded to a stop.

I held up the bucket. “Looky! Yummy oats.”

The bull trotted over to me and butted my chest.

I scratched his ears. “You’re such a good boy.” Backing toward the corral, I poured a line of oats on the ground. Bodacious happily followed me.

Once we were inside the corral, Nate quickly shut the gate and headed for Dodson who was sprawled on the ground, gasping for air.

I poured the rest of the oats into Bodacious’s trough and patted his shoulder. “You’ve been a busy boy today.”

Frank walked over to the corral. “When are you coming back to work?”

“Sunday.”

“Thank God, they have Evans working your district and he is a lazy sonovabitch. I needed a backup for a drunk driver, and he refused to break from a burglary report he was taking,” Frank grouched.

“That’s not good. Have you talked to the sarge about it?”

“No, he’s got a lot on his plate right now.” He frowned. “Shit Dodson is fighting with Nate.” Frank started to climb over the fence.

I stopped him. “Don’t bother. My Grandfather is right behind him.”

“Wow,” Frank exclaimed. “For an old guy, your grandfather has some moves.”

I nodded. “That he does.”

The dinner bell rang. “Food is ready,” Mom yelled.

Frank rushed off.

That man had a hollow leg.

“Get me the enchilada plate,” Julie instructed.

“Will do.” I headed for the food trucks.

Chapter Ten

Grinning like a loon, I hurried toward my car. It had taken almost four hours to get rid of the FBI and their tactical team. Now, I finally got to see for myself how Dante was doing. Butterflies danced in my stomach at the thought of kissing him. That man had a magic tongue.

Dad stepped out of the shadows.

My nerves more than a little frayed, I instinctively drew down on him. “Dammit Dad,

I could have shot you.” I holstered my Glock.

“Grimes has agents patrolling the hospital and the chances of you visiting with Dante aren’t good.” Dad eyed my weapons belt. “And no guns are allowed in the hospital.”

“Not a problem.” I pulled out my cellphone and called Hank, my favorite security guard. “Hank, it’s Gemma Stone and I have a favor to ask.” I smiled. “Yes, I want to see Dante and Dad says the hospital is locked down. Uh, huh. Really? That bad? Wow, that sucks. Can you get me in? You can? Great. I owe you. Okay, I’ll meet you in the west parking lot in an hour.”

“If you get arrested, I’m not bailing you out,” Dad warned.

I rolled my eyes. “I love you too, Dad.”

“Lose the weapons belt.” He vanished into the darkness.

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Mom ran up and handed me an insulated bag. “This is for Dante. It’s steak fajitas.”

“His favorite. Thanks.”

Mom hugged me. “Don’t worry, I’ll bail you out.”

“You, I love.”

“Be careful. Eric Roberts is a sociopath,” Mom cautioned.

I caught a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye. “Kinda like Grandpa, huh?”

“I heard that,” Grandpa growled.

Laughing, I got in my car and headed for the hospital. Just before I got on the freeway, I noticed headlights coming up fast behind me. Hmm. I bet they wanted to play bumper cars. Not tonight. Dante had tinkered with my engine and this baby could move. I hit the gas and swerved in and out of traffic.

My cellphone rang. I glanced at my dashboard. I had an incoming Bluetooth call from the Sheriff’s Office. I bet the officer working in this district had clocked me. I hit the answer button. “Hey, Frank.”

“Do you realize you’re doing 122mph?”

“Yep. I’m losing a tail.”

“Got a description?”

“A newer model Ford panel van. Possibly white or silver.”

“I’ll look for it and for God’s sake, slow the fuck down,” Frank snapped.

“Yes, sir.” I slowed down. “Better?”

“Somewhat. Heading for the hospital?”

“I am.”

“Be careful. The hospital is crawling with Feds,” Frank said.

“I’m always careful.”

Frank snorted. “I’ll hang in the area.”

“Thanks.” I disconnected and glanced at the rearview mirror. My tail was gone.

Twenty acres of orange groves surrounded the hospital. The powers that be had bought the groves with an eye to future growth. My headlights flashed over the lifeless trees. The wind whipped the skeletal branches into gruesome caricatures that seemed to emerge from some shadowy hell. I shuddered. Ever since I found a mutilated body hanging from an orange tree, the place had creeped me out. Tonight was a full moon and lucky me, I got to walk through the groves. Ugh.

I parked on the backside of the orange groves and got out. The wind blowing through the trees created a mournful melody. “Aw, c’mon. Give me a break. It’s not even Halloween.” If Julie could see me now, she would be laughing her ass off.

Grabbing my flashlight, and the insulated bag, I locked the car. I took a cautious look around. Huh? No sign of the Feds. You'd think they would have some guards posted out here. If I was a bad guy, I'd start the trees on fire and use the distraction to get into the hospital.

With a shrug, I walked into the groves. The next thing I knew, I was face down in the dirt. Crap. I had tripped over an exposed root.

Meow! Miss Kitty rubbed against my face.

“What the hell?” I picked her up. “Did you stow away in my car?”

Meow.

“I'll take that as a yes.”

My cellphone rang. “Hello? Calm down Mom, Miss Kitty is with me.” I rubbed my forehead. “I'm not bringing the kitten home until I see Dante.” I winced. “I know Doctor Halliday banned her. I'll figure something out.”

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Glowing red eyes appeared in the darkness.

Shit! “Gotta go, Mom.” Sticking my phone in my front pocket, I got to my feet cradling Miss Kitty against my chest. Just what I needed a hungry coyote. “Shoo! Go away.”

The coyote stared at us and wagged his tail.

Miss Kitty hissed a warning.

“You are not eating Miss Kitty. Go find a nice rabbit.”

The coyote whined and eyed the insulated bag.

“No, you can’t have the fajitas either.” Keeping an eye out for the Feds, I crept through the spooky orchard with the coyote trotting behind me.

Miss Kitty climbed up on my shoulder and hissed at the coyote.

I heaved a sigh. All I wanted to do was spend some time with Dante. I needed to know he was okay. I needed to touch him and the last thing I wanted was another clusterfuck.

The coyote kept following me.

I paused at the tree line and spotted Hank in his cart. I signaled him with my flashlight.

He zoomed over and tossed the coyote a dog bone. “There you go, Edgar.”

Edgar grabbed the bone and ran off.

“You named the coyote?”

Hank shrugged. “It gets pretty boring at night and the bones I give him, keep him from eating people’s pets.”

“True. I really appreciate your help, Hank.”

“I owe you for all the times you’ve saved my ass, but you are aware the kitten has been banned?”

I nodded. “I am. I didn’t realize the little stinker had stowed away.”

“Let’s take the stow away back to your car and you can change.” Hank handed me a bag. “It has a hazmat suit, a stethoscope and a fake ID card.”

Putting the insulated bag on the floorboard, I climbed into the golf cart and tightened my grip on Miss Kitty. “Wow, you got everything I need.”

“The thought of tricking those smug bastards, gives me a hard-on.”

I plastered a smile on my face. “Uh, huh.”

Hank hit the gas, and we flew across the parking lot.

Miss Kitty tunneled under my shirt.

I petted her. “How fast can the cart go?”

“I’ve had it up to 50mph.” He came to an abrupt halt by my car.

“Oh, that’s impressive.” I got out of the car, unlocked my car door and peeled Miss Kitty off my chest. “You’ve got sharp little claws, sweetie.”

Meow!

I quickly put her in the car and locked the door. “Do not claw up my seats.”

Miss Kitty hissed.

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“Right back at ya.” I pulled on the hazmat suit and looked at myself in the side mirror. The hood covered most of my face and with a mask, I doubted anyone would recognize me. “Can you see my gun?” I spun in a circle.

“No, I can’t.”

I attached the ID card to my suit and climbed into the golf cart. “Let’s do this.” Off we went, but this time it was considerably slower.

“Dante’s room is still under quarantine and there are two Feds guarding the door,” Hank advised.

“They really think Roberts is going to come after Dante?”

Hank shrugged. “They seem to think so.”

“I can handle them. Anything else?”

Hank shook his head and stopped the cart by a maintenance door. “Once you are inside, hang a right and take the elevator to the third floor. He’s in room 305.”

“Thanks.”

His radio crackled to life. A deep male voice asked, “Security One what is your location?”

“On patrol in the west parking lot,” Hank replied, looking around uneasily.

I frowned. Were the Feds onto us?

“We need you to respond to the security office. Some of the cameras are down.”

“Copy that.”

“You disabled the cameras,” I gasped in horror. “That could cost you your job.”

Hank jumped out of the cart and unlocked the door. “Nah, the system has been on the fritz for two weeks now.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. This time maybe it’ll get fixed.” Hank opened the door and motioned me inside. “Be careful.”

“I’m always careful.” I entered the maintenance room.

Hank laughed like it was the funniest thing he had ever heard.

“It’s not that funny.”

Hank kept laughing and shut the door.

He was as bad as my family. Making my way around an assortment of cleaning equipment, I cracked open the maintenance door and peeked out. The coast was clear. I turned right and headed for the elevators.

An older nurse with silver hair parked a metal cart filled with IV bags and needles by the nurse’s station and disappeared into the ladies’ room.

I casually walked over to it. Yay, the nurse's station was empty. I put Dante's dinner on the bottom shelf, fastened a mask over my mouth and wheeled the cart over to the elevators. I tapped my foot nervously. The way my luck had been running, she only had to wash her hands.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. Whew! It was empty. As the doors closed, I caught a glimpse of the nurse leaving the restroom. She was going to be pissed when she discovered her cart was gone.

The elevator doors opened, and I stepped out. Sure enough, there were two Feds sitting outside Dante's room. Both men were chowing down on sandwiches.

Hmmm. Kinda late for dinner, and boy, were they messy eaters. Their crumb-covered N95 masks were on the floor, instead of covering their faces.

Wheeling the cart over to them, I held out my ID card, and announced, "I need to change the patient's IV."

They barely glanced at my ID and waved me on.

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If I hadn't wanted to see Dante so badly, I would have chewed them out. Anyone could get to him. I rolled the cart into the room and closed the door.

Dante bolted upright. "Gemma!"

"How did you know it was me?"

"I would know you anywhere,querida. Did you bring me something to eat?"

I studied Dante's face. He was still a little pale. "Of course, steak fajitas."

"Have I told you how much I love you?"

Grinning, I picked up the insulated bag, pulled out Dante's dinner and placed it on his tray. "It's from Bitsie's food truck."

"Where's the hot sauce?"

I looked in the bag. Sure enough, Mom had included hot sauce and a fork. I placed them on his tray and refilled his water glass. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, but I still stink," Dante groused, practically inhaling his food.

I tapped my mask. "I can't smell a thing."

Amusement flashed across Dante's face. "Bring me up to date."

“Okey-dokey. Let me start with Miss Kitty.” I was halfway through my story when Dante interrupted me.

“Wait! All that commotion was caused by a kitten?”

I nodded. “It was.”

“Unbelievable. Continue.” Dante shoved more food in his mouth.

“The CIA breached our computers.”

Dante held up his hand. “TheCIA?”

“Yep. Eric Roberts is at the top of their most-wanted list.”

“Go on,” Dante instructed.

“Then some wannabe cowboys attacked.”

Dante’s eyebrows rose in disbelief. “Wannabe cowboys?”

“Uh, huh.”

The door was thrown open and the FBI agents entered with the guns drawn. “What’s going on in here?”

I raised my hands and glanced at the IV bag. Thank God, it was almost full. “I’m doing my job.”

“Where did the food come from?” The taller agent demanded.

Dante bristled. “My girlfriend ordered it, and the nurse was kind enough to bring it to me.”

The other agent grabbed my ID card and yanked it off my suit. “How do I know this is you?”

My temper flared. “Where are your masks? This room is still in quarantine! Do you want to catch meningitis, streptococcus or pseudomonas? The patient is still radioactive too. Do you want your man parts to rot and fall off?” I glared at the agents. “Well, do you?”

Lowering their guns, the agents backed away from the bed. “No, ma’am.”

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I tossed the taller agent a bottle of antimicrobial soap. “Go to the nearest men’s room and scrub every inch of your skin. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The agents bolted down the hallway.

Dante laughed. “If you ever turn to the dark side, we’d be in big trouble.” He took my plastic-covered hand and kissed my knuckles. “Querida, you are an amazing woman.”

“Thank you, sir.” I curtsied.

Grandpa ambled into the room. “Have you ever thought about becoming a CIA agent?”

“Hell no!” Dante and I shouted in unison.

Grandpa sighed. “Too bad. You have your mother’s devious nature.”

“Thanks, Grandpa,” I retorted sarcastically.

His cellphone beeped twice. “Time to leave.”

“But... I just got here.”

Grandpa grabbed my arm and pushed the cart into the hallway. “So did Agent Grimes. Let’s go.”

“Love you,” I called over my shoulder as Grandpa dragged me down the hallway.

Dante called, “Be careful.”

“I’m always careful.”

The love of my life burst out laughing.

“Lose the hazmat suit,” Grandpa ordered and stuffed me inside a janitor’s closet.

Well, that was just rude. Getting out of the suit was a lot harder than putting it on. The plastic clung to me like cellophane. Spotting scissors on a shelf, I quickly cut the suit off and stuffed everything but the mask in the trash can.

Gramps knocked on the door. “You about done?”

“Yes.” I opened the door and grinned. Grandpa was sitting in a wheelchair, with an oxygen mask covering his face. His demeanor had changed to that of a feeble old man.

“Let’s go. Grimes is on his way up.”

“He knows what I look like.”

Grandpa took a black wig out of the bag on his lap. “Put it on.”

“You can’t disguise my height,” I reminded him as I put the wig on.

“Don’t have to.” Grandpa pulled the fire alarm.

I threw my hands up. “Are you crazy?”

“Shut up and push.”

I wheeled him to the elevators. “Agent Grimes isn’t stupid. He’ll know it’s a false alarm.”

The elevator dinged. I tensed as Grimes and two agents got off. They ran toward Dante’s room.

“Move it.” Grandpa commanded.

I shoved him in the elevator.

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“We just evacuate with all the other people,” Grandpa said.

Giving him the stink eye, I jabbed the down button.

The elevator’s doors opened to sheer chaos. Where in the hell did all these people come from? It was past visiting hours. Was the emergency room that busy? Two children ran by us, shrieking like little banshees. Their mothers ran after them.

Hank motioned at me. “Ma’am, I need you to evacuate to the west parking lot.”

“Yes, sir.”

Grandpa whispered, “Get us out of here. More agents just arrived.”

I glanced at the doorway. Holy crap! Six FBI agents poured out of a black Explorer. I quickly shoved the wheelchair through the crowd and out the sliding glass doors.

Dad pulled up in his truck and yelled, “Get in.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Retrieving the damn cat,” Dad snapped.

“But...”

Hank appeared at my side and whispered. “You’re drawing unwanted attention, and they’ll have the cameras back online any minute now.” He raised his voice, “Let me

help you get your grandfather in the truck.”

“Who are you?” Grandpa cried in a frail voice. “Where are we? Why are you driving my truck?”

I wanted to laugh. Grandpa was an amazing actor when he wanted to be. His portrayal of a dementia patient was dead on.

Dad watched us struggling to get him in the truck. With an evil grin, he yanked Grandpa into the front seat, smashing his head against the dash.

Grandpa balled his fists.

“No fighting,” I growled.

Hank moved the wheelchair out of the way.

“Are you going to be, okay? I don’t want you to lose your job.”

Hank grinned. “They won’t fire me, and I haven’t had this much fun in years.”

“Good to know.” I climbed in the truck and Dad drove off.

“Where’s your car?” Dad asked.

“North side of the groves.”

The expression on Grandpa’s face gave me the willies. “What does Tess see in you other than your big dick?”

“I know love is a four-letter word to you, but Mom loves him.” I smacked Grandpa in

the chest when he snorted. “And Dad will never, ever leave her behind, like you did.”

Grandpa dropped his gaze. “I had my reasons.”

“I don’t care. Family comes first.”

Dad parked next to my car. “Let me have the damn kitten. Your mother is threatening to sleep on the couch.”

“There’s a horrifying thought.” I carefully surveyed the area. No sign of the FBI or the CIA.” I opened the car door and jumped down. “If you want to be a part of our family Grandpa, act like it.”

Grandpa gave me his psycho stare.

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“Knock it off. I’m not afraid of you.”

He grinned. “No, you’re not.”

“And no fighting.” I unlocked my car. Miss Kitty made a dash for freedom. I caught her before she could escape. “Bad kitty.”

Bad kitty hissed at me.

I handed her to Dad. “Good luck.”

Dad handed her to Grandpa and drove off.

If anything happened to Miss Kitty, Mom would kill them.

Edgar jumped in the back seat, carrying a battered pink toy.

“No! Out! Shoo.”

The coyote whined and wagged his tail.

“Hungry, huh? You are kinda of skinny and where did you get that play pretty from?”

Edgar stared at me with his big, sad eyes.

“You were someone’s pet, weren’t you? Did they dump you when they realized you were a coyote?” I studied him. “Hmmm. Was your momma a German Shepherd?”

Edgar yipped.

Dad was going to have a meltdown when I came home with Edgar. But I couldn't leave him here. If he didn't get hit by a car, someone would poison or shoot him.

Edgar whined pathetically.

"Let's see what I have to eat." I popped the trunk. Hmmm. All I had was protein bars. Grabbing a couple, I closed the trunk, tore the wrappers off and tossed them to him.

The coyote wolfed them down.

I shut the back door. Damn. I knew without a doubt; Edgar had been someone's pet. I got into the driver's seat. Mom was always complaining about the rabbits eating her garden and flowers. Edgar would take care of that problem. With the proper training, he could be taught to leave the cattle alone. Not eating Miss Kitty might take a bit longer.

I started the car. How did I keep Dad from shooting him?

Chapter Eleven

The bedroom door was flung open and Dad bellowed, "Why is there a coyote in my dog run?"

I bolted upright in bed and squinted at Dad. Crap, he was holding a shotgun.

"Coyote?" Julie repeated, rubbing her eyes sleepily. "What time is it?"

"Edgar is not a coyote," I protested.

Dad cocked an eyebrow.

“Okay, he’s got some coyote in him, but I think he’s mostly German Shepherd.”

Dad just stared at me.

“I know Edgar had a family until recently. I don’t know if he got lost or if they abandoned him, but I couldn’t leave him at the hospital. Plus, Mom’s always complaining about the rabbits eating her vegetable garden and flowers. Edgar could take care of them.”

“Coyotes like to eat cats, too, and they have attacked our cattle before,” Dad responded.

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“He likes people, and he made no effort to eat Miss Kitty.”

A muscle in Dad’s jaw twitched. “Prove it.”

“Let me get dressed.” I threw back the covers.

“I’ll be waiting for you at the dog run.” Dad left.

I blew out a long breath. “That went well.”

Julie stared at me in disbelief. “You brought a coyote home?”

“Sorta.” I quickly got dressed.

Julie grabbed her jeans. “This I’ve got to see.”

Slipping on some flip-flops, I ran a brush through my hair and headed for the barn.

The sun peeped over the mountains, turning the morning sky from lavender to cotton candy pink.

“God, it’s not even five,” Julie groused.

“Tell me about it.” I cut through the orange grove and came to an abrupt stop. The door to the dog run was open and Mom was feeding Edgar bacon.

The coyote delicately took the food from her fingers and totally ignored Miss Kitty,

who sat next to him.

Dad watched in disbelief. “Please tell me that’s not our breakfast.”

“Eat cereal. We have five boxes of the stuff,” Mom retorted.

Yikes, they were still at it. “How’s Edgar doing?”

“He’s been a perfect gentleman.” Mom fed him the last of the bacon and stood up.

“Edgar is such a good boy,” I cooed, petting him.

His tail wagged wildly.

“Coyotes can’t be domesticated,” Dad stated.

Mom shot him a dirty look. “Edgar, sit.”

He sat.

“Edgar, down.”

He dropped to the ground.

“Good boy,” Mom rubbed his ears.

I glanced at Mom’s vegetable garden. A jackrabbit was eating her lettuce. Gesturing at the rabbit, I commanded, “Get it, Edgar.”

He shot out of the kennel and pounced on the rabbit.

“Good boy, Edgar,” I cried.

Julie clapped loudly. “Way to go, Edgar.”

The coyote plopped down in the orchard and ate his catch.

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“We’re keeping him,” Mom announced.

Dad stared up at the sky for a long moment. “He needs proper training, and I don’t have the time.”

“I’ll train him,” Grandpa announced out of the blue. “I need a good guard dog, and I could use the company.”

We all stared at him in shock.

“Okay, let’s see how you get along,” Mom said.

My cellphone rang. I didn’t recognize the number. Frowning, I swiped right. “Hello?” A sigh of relief broke from me. “Dante, whose phone are you using? The nurses? Okay. What’s up? You sound a little pissed.”

Dad leaned over and hit the speaker icon.

“The FBI is insisting on taking me into protective custody,” Dante snarled.

Grandpa scowled. “It’s the CIA, not the FBI, and it won’t be protective custody. They want to interrogate you. You need to get out of the hospital, now!”

“They have four agents guarding my room,” Dante advised.

Mom smiled evilly. “We’ll just create a diversion. They won’t know what hit them.”

“Will they go after my family?” There was a thread of fear in Dante’s voice.

Grandpa drawled ominously, “They will.”

“Not a problem,” Mom interjected. “I’ll fly your brothers and your aunt to the Refuge. They’ll be safe there.”

I butted in, “Don’t worry Dante. I’ll call them and let them know what is going on.”

“Thank you,querida.”

“Are you able to fight?” Dad asked.

Dante’s voice was full of defiant fury. “Yes!”

I had a sudden brainstorm. “Dante, do you remember the dance contest where I dressed up as Marilyn Monroe and wore that sexy white dress?”

“The halter-neck, mid-length, white pleated skirt dress?”

“That’s the one, and do you remember how many men you had to warn off?”

“I remember the brawl. It took eight officers to stop it.”

“Marilyn Monroe is about to pay a visit to the hospital and while I’m creating chaos, Dad and Grandpa will take care of the CIA.”

“Who am I going to be?” Julie wanted to know.

“Betty Boop.”

Julie frowned. “Never heard of her.”

“She’s a cartoon character from 1932.

A groan broke from Dante. “Your Betty Boop costume caused a fight too.”

“It did. That’s how I know this will work.”

Grandpa’s smile was downright scary. “Bring the cat. Those CIA goons won’t know what hit them.”

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“I’ll need some clothes too. They burned what I was wearing,” Dante advised.

My grin got bigger. “Not a problem.” I waved at Lucas as he got out of his truck.
“We need you.”

“For what?” He called.

“To rescue Dante from the CIA.”

Lucas frowned. “How are we going to do that?”

“You’re going to become Batman.”

“Batman! Are you nuts?”

Mom interjected, “I still have your Batman suit in the hall closet. Go get it.”

“Yes. ma’am.” Muttering under his breath, Lucas headed for the house.

Lucas made an awesome Batman, so I wasn’t sure what the problem was. “Is your Zorro costume still in the trunk of your car, Dante?”

“It is.”

“Good. The CIA won’t be expecting a bunch of costumed superheroes and famous movie stars to stop them. We just need to find a way to get your costume to you.”

A female voice said, "I'll bring it to him."

"Thank you, and you are?" Her voice was too damn sexy.

"I'm Dorothy Williamson, Dante's nurse. The men guarding him give me the creeps."

Dad scowled. "Have they threatened you, Dorothy?"

"Not exactly. It's how they look at me."

"They're very dangerous men," Grandpa inserted. "Do you have access to sedatives?"

"I do," Dorothy replied.

Grandpa's eyes were like bits of stone. "Start carrying syringes full of strong sedatives until they're gone."

"Yes, sir."

"Give Dante some of the syringes, Dorothy," Dad ordered.

"It'll be my pleasure, sir."

Dad added, "Our eta is about thirty minutes, Dante. Don't let them take you anywhere."

"I won't," Dante promised.

Dorothy interjected, "I can always give him ipecac syrup. Believe me, if he's vomiting on them, they won't want anything to do with him."

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” Dante said.

Dad advised, “Gemma, Julie and Lucas will be at the hospital around ten. They’ll tell the charge nurse they’ve come to cheer up the sick patients.”

“Since we’ve done that before, it should work,” Dante replied.

Dad glanced around. “Anyone have questions?”

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“How long will it take Gemma to transform herself into Marilyn Monroe?” Grandpa asked.

I pursed my lips. “A good forty minutes.”

“Let’s get it done,” Dad said.

Mom let out a whistle. “Edgar! Come.”

Edgar trotted over, carrying the half-eaten rabbit in his mouth.

“In you go.” Mom gestured at the dog kennel.

Edgar walked in, and I closed the gate. “See, he had a family once.”

“Yes, he did, and I’d like to have a talk with them,” Mom snarled.

“Me too.” I grimaced as Edgar chomped down the rabbit’s head. “C’mon Julie, we have some phone calls to make.”

“Explain this Betty Boop to me.”

“I will.”

Dad yelled, “Tess, what did you do with my Mandalorian costume?”

“It’s in the hall closet, where it’s always been,” Mom yelled back.

Chapter Twelve

“The CIA goons have been dealt with, and Dante is changing into his costume,” Dad announced in my ear.

The knot in my stomach eased. “Good to know. There are eight CIA thugs in the parking lot. All are heavily armed. I gave Hank a heads up and he’ll be waiting for us at the check-in desk.”

“Copy that. Any news from your mother?”

“She landed at the Refuge and Dante’s family is safe.”

“Copy that. On our way down.”

“Ten four.” I slid on my oversized sunglasses.

Julie strutted next to me. “I look fabulous.”

“Yes, you do.” I thought Lucas was going to swallow his tongue when he saw her. I had to admit between her curly black wig; red polka dot vintage cocktail dress and her black stilettos she made a damn fine Betty Boop.

One of the CIA thugs headed our way.

I sashayed over to him. “Hello handsome.” I ran a long red fingernail down his chest. “Are you coming to the party?”

“What party?” His gaze roamed over my platinum blonde wig, cherry red lips, and fixed on my cleavage.

I pouted. “We come every other Saturday to cheer up the sick kids and the other patients. Are you feeling ill?”

“Who is she supposed to be?” The thug pointed to Julie.

“Why, she is Betty Boop and he’s Batman.”

The thug took a nervous step backward when Lucas appeared. “I’m going to call this in. You’re not supposed to be...”

Lucas dropped him with one punch.

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I disarmed him while Julie injected the thug with a sedative.

Lucas shoved him behind a bush. "Let's get inside before we attract more attention."

"Relax." I dumped the weapons in the trash can. "Hank disabled the cameras again."

A little girl in a red sundress cried, "Are you Batman?"

"I am." Lucas dropped down on one knee. "Where is your momma?"

She scowled. "Inside. Was that a bad man you stuffed behind the bushes?"

"He is." Lucas put a gloved finger to his lips. "Sssh, it's a secret."

The little girl giggled.

I held out my hand. "It's awfully hot out here and I'm sure your mom is really worried."

"No wanna go in there." The little girl wrapped her arms around Lucas's legs. "Don't make me go! They stick me with needles. Please, I don't wanna go."

Lucas picked her up. "Hey, it's okay. What's your name?"

"Lizzie." Tears ran down her face.

Lucas carried her inside the lobby. "Let's go find your momma and I'll buy you some

ice cream. Okay?”

“Okay.” She laid her head on Lucas’s chest.

“Lizzie!” A frantic woman ran over to us. “Where have you been?”

Julie took the mother’s hand. “It’s okay. She’s fine. Batman is going to get Lizzie some ice cream and I’m sure he’ll buy you some too.”

The mother stared at Lucas in disbelief. “You’re so big and muscly.”

Julie whispered in her ear. “He’s not really Batman.”

“I don’t really care,” the woman whispered back.

Lucas held out his left arm. “Join us?”

The woman took it happily and off they went.

“He’s going to be a great father,” Julie said.

“Yes, he is.” I walked over to the check-in desk where Hank waited. The awestruck expression on his face was funny as hell. He had never seen us dolled up before.

Hank swallowed hard. “You two clean up real nice.”

“Why thank you,” Julie simpered.

“Your menfolk are on their way down,” Hank advised.

I nodded as one of the CIA thugs stared at us. “Are we set up in the cafeteria again?”

“You are.”

Julie blew out a breath of relief as Zorro and the Mandalorian joined us. “You two make awesome superheroes.”

Dante bowed elegantly. “Thank you, my lady.”

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“Could you make me some armor, sir?” Julie asked.

Dad fingered his laser pistol and in a rumble voice asked, “Is the Force with you?”

“It is,” Julie replied, trying not to laugh.

I grinned. Few people realized Dad’s laser pistol and rifle shot real bullets.

“Let’s get the party started,” Hank interrupted. “We are attracting the wrong kind of attention.”

We started for the cafeteria.

“Wait!” The CIA thug yelled and ran after us.

A red-headed nurse tripped him.

The thug did a face plant on the floor and before he could get up, the nurse planted a knee in his back, pulled a syringe from her pocket, and injected him.

The thug’s struggles slowed, then stopped.

“You’ve got be Dorothy.” I held out my hand.

The nurse took it. “I am and you must be Gemma.”

“That’s me.” I pulled her to her feet.

Dorothy smiled. “Take care of Zorro. He’s special.”

“I know.”

Doc Halliday joined us. “What happened here?”

“He tripped and fell,” Dorothy answered blandly.

Doc Halliday eyed us. “That happens a lot around here.” He motioned to an orderly.

“Get me a gurney.”

“Yes, sir.” He hurried off.

The Doc studied Dad’s armor. “Did you make the armor yourself?”

The Mandalorian nodded.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. When Dad was in costume, he acted like the character would. It drove Mom nuts, but, hey, he enjoyed it.

“I’m surprised you didn’t bring the cat,” Doc Halliday commented.

“It wasn’t necessary, sir,” I replied.

Doc Halliday smiled. “With all these superheroes, I guess not. Try to keep the mayhem down.”

“We will,” Julie promised.

Dad warned, “Don’t make promises we can’t keep, Julie.”

“Yes, sir.”

A gray-haired elderly woman zoomed up in a motorized wheelchair. She was wearing a blue mumu, men’s tennis shoes and a face mask. “Let’s get this done. Grimes and his agents are heading our way.”

I eyed her hairy arms. “Grandpa?”

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In his perfect old lady's voice, he replied, "It's Miss Maize to you."

I rolled my eyes and headed for the cafeteria. As soon as we walked in, the kids went wild.

Grandpa parked his wheelchair by the door and kept watch.

Each of the guys spent time with the children, answering all their questions, showing them their weapons and taking selfies. The teenagers, older patients and doctors wanted pictures with Marilyn Monroe and Betty Boop.

I moved a kid's hand off my ass. "No touching."

"You're so pretty and so tall," he gushed.

I patted his cheek. "You're sweet, but if you touch me again, I'll break your fingers."

"You wouldn't."

Julie patted his other cheek. "Yeah, she would."

Seven thugs with guns drawn stormed into the cafeteria and yelled, "Hands up!"

The kids gasped in surprise, raised their hands and started giggling.

Batman hurled his batarangs in quick succession, dropping two CIA thugs.

Crack! Crack!Crack!Zorro's whip lashed out, disarming three more thugs.

Grandpa leaped out of his wheelchair and kicked the crap out of the last two.

The Mandalorian kicked their weapons away and drew his laser pistol. "The Force isn't with you, and I suggest you don't move a muscle."

The kids hooted and hollered, while the older patients clapped loudly.

Whew. They thought the attack was part of the act.

A thug wearing funky blonde dreadlocks sneered, "That laser pistol isn't real."

"But my gun is sugar." I jammed my Glock against the base of his skull.

He raised his hands, and the other thugs quickly followed suit.

Agent Grimes rushed into the room and stumbled to a stop. His astonished gaze fixed on our costumes. "You never stop surprising me."

"Did you think we would let them take Dante?" I snarled.

"No, I didn't." Grimes gestured at Dad's armor. "But I wasn't expecting superheroes riding to the rescue."

Six FBI agents swarmed into the cafeteria and took the prisoners into custody.

Sliding the Glock into my thigh holster, I called, "Who wants cake and ice cream?"

"Me! Me! Me!" the children shouted.

Three hospital workers wheeled a big pink cake over to the table. Each kid got a slice of cake and a scoop of ice cream. We took more selfies with the excited kids.

Dante slid an arm around my waist. “Have I told you how much I love you?”

“Not today.” I smiled suggestively. “Why don’t we find a janitor’s closet and you can show me.”

Dad grabbed my arm and dragged me away from Dante. “No sex until Roberts is dead.”

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“What! That could be months, years,” I protested.

“It’s called incentive.”

Julie ran a hand across Lucas’s chest. “You’re so big and muscly.”

“Knock it off, runt.”

Dad seized her hand and pulled her away from Lucas. “That goes for you too.”

“What? I don’t want to have sex with him,” Julie protested.

I made a kissy face at Lucas.

He gave me the one-fingered salute.

“Superheroes don’t use crude hand gestures,” Grandpa scolded.

Dad added, “Sergeant Bergman wants you to call him about your shift tomorrow.”

“Okay.” I exchanged a worried glance with Julie. Was he putting us on the dreaded dead animal pickup?

Chapter Thirteen

Julie snatched a set of keys off the pegboard and tossed me a radio. “Traffic duty, ugh.”

“It’s better than dead animal pickup.” I slid my Glock into its holster.

Sergeant Bergman stepped out of his office. “Keep complaining and you will be doing both.”

“Yes, sir.” Julie saluted him sharply.

I stared at her in horrified disbelief. What in the hell was wrong with her? “We love traffic duty, sir.” I elbowed Julie in the stomach.

“That’s right, sir. We love traffic duty.”

The sarge stared at Julie for a long moment. “Git, before I change my mind.”

“Yes, sir.” I grabbed the keys to my assigned vehicle off the pegboard and dragged Julie behind me. Once we were in the parking lot, I demanded, “What crawled up your butt and died.”

“Lucas kissed me.”

My jaw dropped. “He did?”

“Yes.”

“Did you kick his ass?”

“No,” Julie sniffed. “I liked it. A lot.”

I threw up my hands. “Then what’s the problem?”

“He doesn’t like me.”

Frank hurried up to us. “I left my lunch at home.”

I dug a ten-dollar bill out of my pocket and handed it to him. “Go away.”

“Okay.” He took one look at Julie’s face and asked, “Anything I can do to help?”

“No,” Julie snapped.

Frank backed away. “Just askin’.”

“What makes you think Lucas doesn’t like you?”

Her shoulders sagged. “After he kissed me, he shoved me away and puked.”

“Oh.” Damn.

Sergeant Bergman bellowed, “Quit gossiping and get to work.”

“Yes, sir.” I grabbed Julie’s hand before she could give the sarge a one-fingered salute. “Are you trying to get fired?”

Julie stormed over to her patrol car. “I made him puke. Am I that disgusting?”

“Not at all. I know Lucas likes you. I’m sure there’s a reason for him vomiting.”

Popping the trunk on her patrol car, Julie did her vehicle inspection. “Really? He looked at me in absolute horror and ran away.”

“Lucas ran?” Yikes!

Julie checked the back seat of her patrol car. “He did.”

“Hmmm. Maybe it was food poisoning. He did get sushi from Bitsie’s food truck.”

Wiping at the tears running down her face, Julie got into her car and started the engine. “I’ll run radar on Thunderbird.” She drove off.

“Damn.”

Sergeant Berman asked, “What upset Garza?”

I jumped about a foot. Geezus. I needed to put a bell on the sneaky bastard. “Lucas vomited after he kissed her.”

“So? Four deputies got sick from eating the sushi from Bitsie’s truck.”

A laugh broke from me. “Lucas must be mortified.”

“Probably. Send Julie a text, before she shoots someone.” Sergeant Bergman strolled off.

I quickly checked my patrol car for any contraband and sent Julie a text about the bad sushi.

My phone dinged.Seriously?

Yes.

Whew.

I will get the downlow.

A big smiley face emoji appeared on my screen.

Crisis averted. I hoped. I popped the trunk and checked my supplies. Good to go. I

got in my patrol car and went to find some speeders.

Ten minutes later, I got my wish. A yellow, beat all to hell, truck blew through a red light, barely missing a woman in a blue minivan.

I flipped on the overheads and gave chase. Crap. The idiot wasn't slowing down; I added the sirens. A mile down the road, the moron finally pulled over. I keyed my radio mic, "Charlie-23, show me out at 99th and Greenway with David Adam Nora four two four."

"Copy, Charlie-23," the dispatcher responded.

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Opening my door, I stepped out and approached the truck cautiously. More officers got killed on simple traffic stops, than on armed robberies or domestic violence.

I blew out a long breath, the idiot hadn't rolled the window down. If he wanted to play hardball, so be it. I knocked on the glass.

The driver, an older white male with a long gray beard, totally ignored me. "Did you know beards have been found to be dirtier than toilet seats?" I said loudly.

The driver's head snapped around and the window rolled down. "You think you're funny or what?"

"No, sir, but you do have some powdered sugar in your beard."

He glared at me and licked the powdered sugar off his beard.

Ugh, that was totally gross.

"Why did you pull me over?"

"You were speeding; you ran a red light and almost hit a blue minivan. I need your license, registration and proof of insurance."

Grumbling under his breath, he gave me his paperwork. "You are a fucking bitch."

"Why thank you. Do you know how fast you were going, sir?"

“No.”

I smiled. “I guess that means I can write anything I want on the ticket.”

He stared at me in utter disbelief.

I raised an inquiring eyebrow.

“Fifty,” he snarled.

“The speed limit is forty, sir.”

The idiot’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Can’t you give me a warning?”

“A warning? Okay, I’m warning you to slow down and obey all the traffic laws or I will give you another ticket.”

“That’s not fair.”

My temper flared. “You want me to be fair? Fair is where you go to ride the Ferris wheel, eat cotton candy, and play ring toss.”

“Am I making your quota for the day?” He shot back.

I gave him my Debbie Sunshine smile. “You are. Now I can get the toaster oven I’ve been wanting.”

“Bitch!” He slammed his hand against the steering wheel. “I’m going to call the sheriff and get you fired.”

Enough was enough. In my best mean mother voice, I stated, “I’m going back to my

car to run your name through the NCIC database. You will stay in the car. If you attempt to run, I will chase you down and arrest you. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." As I walked back to my patrol car, I noticed Sergeant Bergman parked across the street. I held up four fingers.

He nodded and drove off.

Unfortunately, Dennis Johnson didn't have any outstanding warrants. I wrote him a ticket for speeding and running a red light. An evil smile curved my mouth. Those tickets would cost him over eight hundred dollars.

I walked up to the truck and handed him the tickets. "You are scheduled to appear in court in three weeks. If you miss your court date, a warrant will be issued for your arrest. Have a nice day, sir."

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Glaring at me, Dennis drove off slowly.

Chapter Fourteen

“Charlie-23 and Charlie-24 I’m receiving multiple silent alarms at 30325 West Windmill Road,” the dispatcher advised.

Shit! Some moron was breaking into my parent’s ranch or our temporary substation. How stupid was that? There were cops there all the time. “Show me en route and has anyone called the substation?”

“I did and no one answered,” the dispatcher replied.

“Copy.” Hmmm. That was weird.

“Charlie-24 I’m responding.”

“George-20 copies and show me en route,” Sergeant Bergman said.

My cellphone rang. I glanced at my dashboard. I had an incoming Bluetooth call from the Sheriff’s Office. “Stone.”

“Are they suicidal?” Julie asked.

I snickered. “Either that or the CIA is trying to breach our computers again.”

“Agent Grimes said they had all been kicked back to D.C.”

“They want Eric Roberts too badly to tuck tail and run. Plus, they still think we’re hiding information from them.”

“True. I’m about ten minutes out,” Julie advised.

“Okay, I’m pulling up to the gate now.” I frowned. “There are two livestock trailers parked in the driveway.”

“Did your dad buy more cattle?”

“Not that I know of.” My gaze froze on two men lying face down on the ground. “Oh shit! We have officers down.”

“I’m going code three.” The link severed.

Tossing my cellphone on the seat, I blocked the gate with my patrol car and keyed my radio mic, “Dispatch, send me additional units and the paramedics. I have unauthorized vehicles on scene and two officers down.”

“Copy Charlie-23.”

Turning the volume down on my radio, I noticed two of those wannabe cowboys trying to load Max into a horse trailer.

Max reared up and kicked at the cowboys.

A cowboy wearing a Mexican sombrero jammed a cattle prod against Max’s rump, forcing him into the trailer.

His scream made me sick to my stomach. Those bastards were going to pay for hurting Max.

Sombrero raised the cattle prod again.

I shot it out of his hand.

Shrieking blue bloody murder, sombrero clutched his hand and ran off.

His buddy pulled an old-fashioned six-shooter and fired wildly.

Damn, he couldn't hit the broad side of the barn. I shot him in both arms and legs. He wasn't going to be able to shoot another officer or hurt our critters.

"You fucking bitch, I'm going to kill you," he screeched.

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Eight men poured out of the substation with weapons drawn.

Shit! I dived over the three-foot patio wall. Seconds later, a barrage of bullets struck the brick. I hit the emergency button on my radio.

The dispatcher's muted voice asked, "Charlie-23 what is the nature of your emergency?"

Seriously? Like officers down didn't give her a clue that I was being shot at. Scrambling on my hands and knees, I headed for the patio doors. If I could get inside, I could lock myself in the command center until help arrived.

A big, bear of a man wearing a clown's mask, stepped out of the shattered glass doors. He raised a double-barreled shotgun.

Fuck! I rolled behind a huge Mexican flowerpot. Boom! Shards of pottery pelted my face. I popped up and fired.

The man toppled backward into the house.

The crack of a high-powered rifle sounded.

Before I could move, pain exploded in the middle of my back, dropping me like a rock. I landed on the clown. Black dots danced in my vision as I struggled to breathe. God that hurt. Once again, my vest had saved the day. Up. I had to get up. I hit the emergency button on my radio again.

“Charlie-23 your backup is five minutes out,” the dispatcher advised.

“Your backup is never going to arrive,” a harsh voice commented. He kicked my gun away.

I held the transmit button down on my radio and gasped, “Why?”

“We planted landmines on the highway just before Chuck Hennessy’s house. The one you blew all to hell. Now we are going to return the favor. If you listen closely, you might even hear the screams of the dying.”

I hadn’t hit any landmines. Was he bluffing? My voice a wheezy rasp, I asked, “What. Do. You. Want?”

“Vengeance.”

My vision finally cleared. The man standing over me had to be Grandpa’s age. I blinked. Whoa! The left side of his face was a mass of scar tissue. He was wearing a black Stetson, black velvet pants and a red silk shirt with silver buttons. “For. What?”

The man frowned. “Why aren’t the landmines exploding?” His gaze fixed on the radio clutched in my hand. “You little bitch!” He shoved a cattle prod into my stomach and triggered it.

A scream tore from me as a horrific electrical shock triggered every muscle in my stomach to contract in the world’s worst Charley horse.

Scarface picked up my radio. “If I see any cops within a mile of this place, your deputy is a dead woman.”

“What do you want?” Sergeant Bergman demanded.

“To end the Alpha Dogs.” Scarface threw the radio on the ground and stomped on it until it shattered into pieces. He gestured at me. “Bring her.”

Two goons jerked me to my feet and dragged me over to a cattle hauler.

Scarface brutally grabbed my face and forced my head up. “You will get that bull into the hauler.”

“If I don’t?”

“I will kill him.”

One look at his cold, dead eyes and I knew he wasn’t bluffing. “I need oats.”

“Billie Bob, get her some oats,” Scarface commanded.

He rushed off.

“You’re. Eric Roberts,” I wheezed.

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “That man died in the bomb blast. Your grandfather is quite clever at hiding his trip wires. I chose to become James Bass. I now run a cattle ranch called Triangle 8.”

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“You... run,” I rasped, “Cochise Cowboys.”

He released me. “You are a clever girl, just like your mother.”

Billie Bob hurried up with a pail of oats and handed it to me.

Bodacious bellowed in fury and slammed into the gate.

“Put her in the hauler,” Bass ordered.

His goons carried me up to the feed trough and handcuffed me to a metal slot. My eyes widened in surprise. Edgar and Miss Kitty were hiding in the loose hay. I stepped in front of them.

“If the bull isn’t in the hauler in sixty seconds, I will shoot him.” Bass racked his shotgun. “Open the gate.”

Bodacious charged out.

I held up the pail of oats and squeaked, “Bodacious. Oats.”

With a snort, he came straight to me and sniffed my face.

The goons quickly raised the ramp and locked it in place.

Bodacious stomped his feet and bellowed.

I scratched his ears. “I know, buddy. We’re in big trouble.”

One of the Cochise Cowboys pointed at the sky. “There’s a drone, boss.”

“I see it.” Bass picked up a rifle and shot it down.

I caught a flash of movement by the barn. Had the cavalry arrived in time?

Bass studied the area around the barn for a long moment, then shouted, “I’ve booby trapped the place with bombs, Reynolds. Do you think you can disarm all of them in time?”

Grandpa yelled back, “I do. Let Gemma go. This is between you and me.”

Kaboom!Grandpa’s RV blew into a million pieces. The flaming debris caught the barn on fire.

“Grandpa,” I cried.

Laughing like a madman, Bass walked over to me and yanked on the handcuffs. I slammed against the metal wall.

“We are going to get to know each other really well.” Bass jabbed a needle into my arm. “Soon you will be screaming my name.”

I pulled on the handcuffs. “You are a dead man. Do you hear me? A dead man.”

Bass kept laughing and climbed into the semi-truck’s cab.

“Bastard!” I pulled my body camera off and slid it through one of the slots. It was my only hope of rescue. A wave of weariness rolled over me.

The semi-truck rammed my patrol car, knocking it out of the way. I saw Billie Bob toss something through the window.

What the hell?

Kaboom! My patrol car erupted into a ball of flames and my stash of chocolate was gone forever.

Edgar jumped on my lap.

“Armageddon is gonna rain down on your ass,” I whispered and everything faded to black.

Chapter Fifteen

A groan broke from me. God, I hurt all over. Had I been in a fight? Ugh. My mouth was dry as sandpaper and I really needed to pee.

A dog whined.

Huh? We didn't have a dog. Did we?

Bodacious snuffled my hair.

"I'll get you some oats in a minute. Tired. Need to sleep."

Little paws patted my face. Meow. Meow. Meow. Meow.

"Miss Kitty?" Memories came flooding back. "Oh, shit!" I bolted upright. Grandpa! Had he survived the explosion? He was a cantankerous old bastard, but I loved him anyway.

Edgar licked at my tears.

I petted him. "I love you too. Do you have any idea where we are?"

Woof.

"Me neither." I glanced at my watch. Damn, I had been unconscious for about five hours. I could be anywhere. The question was: How did I get all of us out of a locked

hauler in one piece? The lock for the hauler was on the outside and the metal slots were too small to fit my hand through.

The semi-truck slowed down.

I glanced through the trailer's metal slots. On the other side of the road were white-washed concrete Indian teepees. Oh, my, God! I knew where I was. The Wigwam Hotel was in Holbrook, Arizona. Crap. I was two hundred miles from home and totally on my own. If I could get to a phone, I could get the cavalry started in the right direction. I knew there was a statewide alert on me, but who would look here? The answer would be no one.

Bass had picked the perfect place to hide out. Once upon a time, Holbrook had been a bustling cow town full of outlaws and rustlers. The Hashknife gang robbed trains and stagecoaches as a form of recreation when they weren't rustling cattle. Was Bass behind the string of I-40 train robberies?

The semi-truck stopped at the one and only red light.

I looked around for help. Damn, the sidewalks were empty except for one little girl holding a yellow balloon. "Hi, what's your name?"

"Tina. That's a big cow."

"Yeah, he is. Where's your mom?"

"Workin'."

"I need help." I took out a business card and wrote Holbrook on the back. "Can you give this to your mom? It's really important. Bad men kidnapped me." I pushed the card through the slots. "Please."

Tina ran over and took the card. “Is that a coyote?”

“Yes. His name is Edgar.”

“Can I pet him?”

“No!”

“Can I pet the kitty?”

I resisted the urge to scream. “No, the bad men will see you.”

“Where are the bad men?”

“Driving the truck. Now, run and give the card to your mom. Right now! There’s a big reward.”

“Okay.”

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The light turned green, and off we went. I watched Tina until she was out of sight. She hadn't moved a muscle. My shoulders slumped. Damn.

Miss Kitty rubbed against my face. Meow.

"You're right. I can't give up. As fast as I could I wrote Holbrook on the back of my remaining business cards and shoved them through the slot. Would anybody pick one up? God, I hoped so.

The semi-truck made a hard left turn onto a dirt road. I bounced as we hit pothole, after pothole, after pothole.

Bodacious bellowed.

"I know. Pretty scary. I won't leave you behind. I promise. I just need to figure a way out of this without getting us killed."

The semi hit the mother of all potholes. I locked my jaws to keep my teeth from being jarred loose. I peered through the slots. No sign of civilization. Just cedar trees dotted the rolling hills.

The semi-truck turned onto another dirt track.

I caught a glimpse of an old, crumbling adobe house surrounded by dead cottonwood trees.

The truck stopped next to some weather-beaten outbuilding. To my utter relief, Max

was at the back of a large corral.

A hint of malicious humor in his voice, Bass called, “Honey, we’re home.”

My stomach knotted and I quickly covered Edgar with hay. “Stay.”

“Billie Bob is going to drop the ramp and you’re getting the bull into the corral with the horse. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.” Nausea rolled my stomach. Bass radiated a sexual menace that was both frightening and disgusting.

Bass unlocked my handcuffs. “I’m going to enjoy breaking you.”

“And I’m going to take immense pleasure in killing you.”

His mouth drew back into a feral snarl, and he gestured with his gun. “Get the bull in the corral.”

“I need some oats.”

“Get her the oats, Billie Bob.”

“Yes, boss.” He disappeared into the closest outbuilding.

“I think the fastest way to beat the sass out of you is with a whip.”

It took everything I had, not to show any fear. “You won’t live to see tomorrow.”

Billie Bob burst out of the building. “Boss, you’ve got a phone call.”

“Who is it?”

“Dixon. Something about a screw up in the fentanyl shipment.”

Bass snatched the phone out of his hand. “What happened? The fucker did what? We’ll have to hit the train outside of Winslow. I’ll meet you at Smith’s ranch in an hour.”

He stuffed the phone in his pocket and turned his attention to me. “Get the bull in the corral. Now!”

“Back Bodacious. C’mon back up.” To my relief, he obeyed me. Once we reached the end of the ramp, Billie Bob handed me the bucket of oats. “Yummy oats, Bodacious.”

He followed me through the gate.

Max let out a loud whinny and galloped toward us.

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Billie Bob quickly shut the gate.

Max skidded to a stop next to me and nickered wildly.

“I know. You’re safe now. You’re safe.” I petted him and slowly poured the oats into the trough. I eyed the back gate.

“Go ahead. Try to run. I’m an excellent shot,” Bass taunted. “Let’s go before I decide to gut-shoot you.”

My back spasmed as I climbed over the fence. I was in serious need of some muscle relaxers.

“No food or water for you until you learn some manners.” Grabbing my ponytail, Bass dragged me inside the smaller outbuilding and threw me into a metal cage with a piss bucket in the corner.

“You’re smuggling people too, huh?” I tried not to show how much pain I was in.

Bass locked the door, turned and left without saying a word.

My shoulders sagged in relief when I heard the semi-truck start up and leave. Bass probably wouldn’t be back for a couple of hours, and I needed to be long gone.

Edgar scratched at the door and whined.

“Give me a second.” A grin curved my mouth as I examined the lock. Easy peasy.

Taking the lockpick out of my bra, I inserted it into the lock, twisted and poof! It opened.

Miss Kitty meowed.

Max whinnied.

Bodacious bellowed.

Huh? It sounded like they were standing at the door. I turned the knob, and they all rushed in, pinning me against the wall. “Back up, you’re squashing me. C’mon back.” They all licked me at once. Ugh. “Okay, okay. I love you too, but we need to leave before Bass, and his crew come back.”

Max nosed a bridle hanging on the wall.

“Good idea. I’m not in any shape to walk very far.” I quickly fastened the bridle on him.

My eyes widened when I noticed three complete pipe bombs lying on a table. I rubbed my hands together. Paybacks were a bitch. I set the timer on the first one for twenty minutes. It should give us enough time to get out of range.

Reaching for the other two I stopped dead as a sudden thought hit me. Had Chuck made them? Probably. After a careful examination they looked safe. Very cautiously, I picked them up and carried them outside.

The critters followed me.

Hmmm. Where would I get the most bang for the buck? I needed my smoke signal to be seen for miles. My gaze settled on a large five-hundred-gallon propane tank.

Perfect. I set the timer for twenty minutes.

Tapping my chin, I looked around for another spot, and my jaw dropped. Someone had dropped a cellphone! I snatched it off the ground. Damn. No bars, but it was evidence. One glance at my watch and I placed the last bomb next to the smaller outbuilding.

I tried to mount Max, but my abused muscles locked up. I gritted my teeth until the pain subsided.

Miss Kitty skittered up my leg. Meow.

“I know. I’m being a pansy.”

Bodacious snuffled my hair. I didn’t even want to know how much bull snot I had in my hair.

Max nuzzled my face.

“Sorry, buddy, I’m really banged up.” I led him over to a stump and used it to get on Max’s back. “Let’s go before everything goes boom.”

Max broke into a gallop with Bodacious and Edgar running behind us.

Ow. Ow. Ow. As soon as we were two miles from the ranch, I slowed him down. It was all I could do to stay upright.

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A thunderous cracking boom shook the ground, and a huge fireball rose high into the air.

Yeow! That should get some attention.

To my relief, Max didn't even twitch.

Bodacious pawed the ground nervously.

Edgar jumped on my lap and shivered.

I hugged him to me. "It's okay. It's okay."

Miss Kitty tunneled under my shirt.

Kablooey! Another explosion rocked the ground.

Bodacious took off at a dead run.

Grabbing a handful of Max's mane, I urged him into a gallop.

Three miles later, Bodacious finally slowed to a stop.

"Oh, thank God." I slumped over Max's neck. "I want a massage. A big glass of iced tea, some chocolate and a bunch of Tylenol."

Edgar licked my face.

“And a doggie bone for you.”

The whump-whump of a helicopter had me raising my head. It was Mom’s Huey.
“We’re going home guys.”

Chapter Sixteen

A Holbrook newspaper reporter spotted the explosions and rushed to the scene, thinking it was an airplane crash. Instead, he came across me slumped over Max’s neck with Edgar perched behind me and Bodacious standing guard. The photo made me a ten-day wonder. Every news station in the country wanted an interview. Ugh. The Sheriff talked me into doing two, even though I was still battered and bruised.

Thankfully, the little girl’s mother had seen the news reports about a missing Maricopa County Sheriff’s deputy and had called right away. As a reward Dad invited them to spend a weekend at the Refuge.

My grandfather survived the explosion with only minor injuries and was included in the FBI task force going after James Bass aka Eric Roberts.

The Cochise Cowboys derailed the train five miles outside of Winslow and were loading boxes of stolen Nikes and smuggled fentanyl into several trucks when the CIA showed up. Yep, the CIA. In the ensuing gun battle James Bass was shot twenty-two times and none of his gang survived either.

Let’s just say Agent Grimes and Grandpa were seriously pissed.

The whole ordeal had left me more than a little jumpy and I knew everyone was worried about me. Looking for a little peace, I went out to the vegetable garden and started pulling weeds.

“What are you doing?” Dante growled.

“Weeding.”

“You are supposed to be resting.”

I snorted. “Kinda hard to do with everyone stopping by to check on me.”

“You scared the hell out of all of us.”

A jackrabbit shot out of the tomato plants with Edgar in hot pursuit. His neon orange collar was very eye-catching.

“I know.” I pulled out another weed.

“What you need is a change of scenery. How do you feel about a nice, relaxing vacation on Kauai?”

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“Uh huh. How are we going to pay for it?”

Dante scooped me up. “Your grandfather has arranged everything.”

“And how does Dad feel about that?”

“He organized our transportation.”

“Which is?” I had people running up to me at the supermarket, gas stations and the nail salon to give me a hug or ask for an autograph. Like I was famous or something.

“A private jet will fly us to Kauai.” Dante gently brushed his mouth across mine.

“A jet?”

“Yes. Your grandfather got us a luxury condo on the North Shore. He also booked us a Zodiac boat tour around the Napali Coast, a sunset dinner cruise, and there’s snorkeling and kayaking.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and gave him a long, voracious kiss. “When do we leave?”

“Now.”

“What? I’m not packed or anything.”

Julie rolled my suitcase across the patio. “Everything you need is in there. Your mom

is waiting in the Huey to take you to the airport.”

Dante headed for the helipad. “We can join the Mile High club, and we won’t have to do it in the bathroom.”

Julie laughed. “You’ll have the entire plane to yourselves.”

“Are you talking to Lucas yet?”

Her laughter died. “No.”

“Sorry.” Why was Lucas being such a jerk?

“It’s not your fault.”

Time to change the subject. “Is Sergeant Bergman okay with me taking time off?”

“He is.”

Dad was standing by the Huey. “You ready to go kitten?”

“I am.”

Dante dropped me on my feet.

“You take care of her,” Dad growled and shoved a handful of condoms into Dante’s hand. “The women in this family are very fertile.”

His eyes full of laughter, Dante nodded. “I had noticed.”

I wrapped my arms around Dad’s waist. “I can take care of myself, and I’m on the

pill.”

“Good to know.” He kissed the top of my head. “Go. Have some fun.”

“We will.” I climbed into the helicopter and strapped into the co-pilot’s seat. Before I could say a word, the Huey shot into the air. Yikes, Dante was a white-knuckle flier.

I blew out a long breath. Mom still blamed herself for what happened. Putting the headset on, I keyed the mic, “Eric Roberts is dead. He can never hurt our family again. You are not responsible for that lunatic’s actions.”

“He could have killed you.”

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“But he didn’t, and I don’t blame you, or Grandpa or Dad for what happened.”

Mom flashed me a watery smile. “When I knew he had you, it was the worst day of my life.”

I grinned. “Coming after us was the worst decision of his life.”

“That it was.” Mom landed at the Litchfield Air Park. “The Learjet is yours.”

“Wow! I’ve always wanted to fly in one.” I released my seatbelt, leaned over and kissed Mom’s cheek. “You and Dad should spend some time at the Refuge.”

“We will.”

I climbed out of the helicopter and joined Dante on the tarmac. “Ready for some fun in the sun.”

“I am.” He rolled our suitcase over to the jet.

A man in a pilot’s suit eyed me for a moment, then smiled and held out his hand to Dante. “My name is Josh Webber and I’m your pilot.”

Dante shook his hand. “How long is the flight to Kauai?”

“Six hours and forty minutes,” Josh replied, putting our luggage in the cargo hold.

I gave Dante my best come-hither smile. “Plenty of time.”

“Yes, it is.” We hurried up the stairs.

Huh? There wasn’t a bed, just plush leather seats, a tiny galley and a small bathroom.

We took our seats and buckled in.

I whispered, “What happened to the bed?”

“Your father got us a jet without one, and the condoms are his idea of a joke.”

Dad was sneaky like that.

The pilot secured the outer door. “We’ll be in the air shortly. Help yourselves to any of the beverages and there are some sandwiches in the refrigerator.

“Thanks,” I said politely.

Josh eyed me again.

“Yes, I’m that deputy on the local news.”

Nodding, he hurried into the cockpit and closed the door.

“Well, hell. We can do it in the chair, on the floor or squeeze into the bathroom.

The jet taxied to the runway.

Dante waggled his eyebrows. “Let’s try the bathroom. I don’t want him walking in on us.”

The jet lifted into the air.

Our lips met in a heady kiss.

Dante scooped me up and carried me into the restroom. The door closed behind him.
“Damn. I can’t move.”

A giggle escaped me at the disgust on his face. His shoulders filled the tiny space, and the ceiling was only inches from our heads. “Guess this bathroom is only for Lilliputians like Julie.”

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“This isn’t going to work.”

“Give me a second.” I wiggled until I was sitting on the closed toilet seat. There was a sizeable bulge in his pants. “Poor little guy needs some air.”

Dante snorted. “Little? I don’t think so.”

Unbuckling his belt, I lowered the zipper and out popped his penis. “What happened to your tighty whities?”

“Didn’t pack any.”

“Well, it does make bathroom sex easier.” Precum beaded on the head of his penis. I licked it off.

Dante shuddered.

“Like that?”

“God yes.”

I scraped my teeth along the tender flesh of his penis.

Dante jerked and smacked his head on the ceiling. “Sonovabitch.”

“Want me to stop?”

“Hell no.”

I ran my tongue over his long, hard length and licked him like he was my favorite chocolate ice cream.

A low, husky growl of raw desire escaped Dante.

The jet rocked violently.

Dante fell on top of me and his penis pushed against my throbbing pussy. I moaned.

A second later, the jet went into free fall.

We bounced off the ceiling and hit the floor hard. “Shit! Are we crashing?”

“Dunno.” Dante struggled to get off me.

The ridge of his penis slide across my mouth. I instinctively squeezed it with my teeth.

Dante’s hips bucked. “You’re killing me.”

More turbulence shook the jet.

“Then we’ll die with a smile on our faces,” I replied. I sucked his cock into my mouth. There was an easy way to get your guy to climax. Squeeze. Release. Squeeze. Release. For the piece de resistance, I pushed the tip of his dick into the roof of my mouth.

Dante’s body bowed and shook violently as I launched him into an orgasmic tsunami.

The aircraft bucked wildly, and we smacked into the ceiling again. A second later, Dante's semen spurted all over the mirror. Oops.

"You are amazing,querida."

"I aim to please, but I'm getting a Charley horse in my right leg. Can you get the door open?"

"Let me try." Dante wiggled this way and that. "Damn. I can't reach the doorknob."

I examined the bathroom. "I'll stand up on the toilet and lean to the left. If you lean to the right, I should be able to open the door.

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Dante squeezed against the wall.

I threw the door open and dived out. Thump! I hit the wall hard. Ouch! I rubbed my head.

“Are you hurt?” Dante helped me to my feet.

The cockpit door opened. “You two okay. We hit a bit of turbulence.”

A bit?

“We’re fine.” Dante quickly tucked his penis away.

The jet shook violently.

I scrambled into a chair and buckled my seatbelt. “If this jet crashes, I’m killing the pilot.”

“How do you feel about marriage?” Dante asked out of the blue.

I gaped at him. “What? You want to get married?”

“We are soul mates, my family loves you, your family is adjusting to me. We have the same interests. The kidnapping made me realize I can’t imagine life without you.”

Dante held up a small black velvet box. “Want to give it a try?”

My mouth worked, but nothing came out.

“Is that a yes or a no?”

I knew he loved me, but wow! Marriage? And what had happened to my romantic Latino? He was acting more like a gawky nerd.

“Gemma?”

I knew from the minute we met; he was the one I had been waiting for. “Yes! I will marry you.”

Dante’s worried expression melted into a dazzling smile. He opened the box and placed a sapphire petals engagement ring on my finger.

“It’s perfect.”

“I know this isn’t the romantic proposal most women expect, but...”

I placed the tip of my finger against his lips. “Shut up and kiss me.”

“Yes,querida.” His mouth closed over mine.

The End? Nope.