

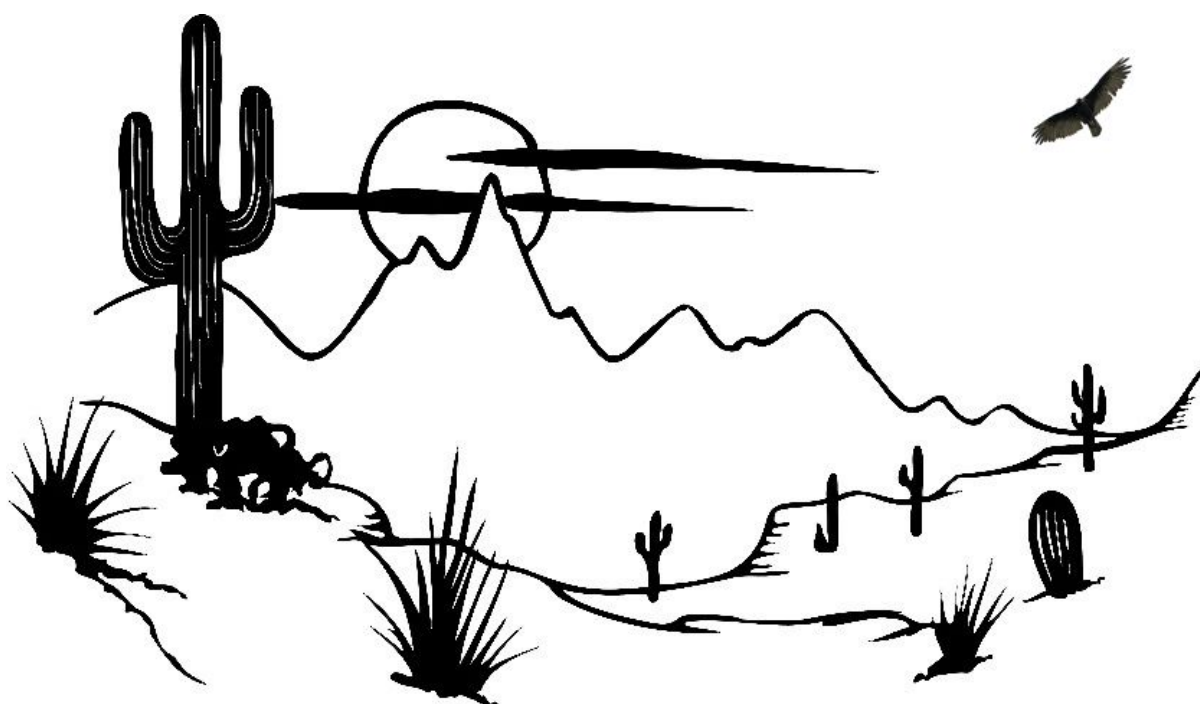
Scottsdale Scotchmen

*Whips and chains
can be murder...*

4

a fun, romantic, thrilling, adventure!

BA Trimmer



The Laura Black Scottsdale Mystery Series

The Laura Black
Scottsdale Mystery Series
by B A Trimmer

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*Scottsdale Heat*  
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*Scottsdale Secret*

# Scottsdale Scorcher

B A Trimmer



## SCOTTSDALE SCORCHER

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Saguaro Sky Media Co. Scottsdale, Arizona, USA

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E-mail the author at:

[LauraBlackScottsdale@gmail.com](mailto:LauraBlackScottsdale@gmail.com)

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# Introduction

If you've never read a Laura Black Scottsdale mystery, you can start with *Scottsdale Heat*, the first book in the series. If you'd rather start with this book, here are a few of the people you'll need to know:

Laura Black – Laura grew up in Arizona and currently works as an investigator in a Scottsdale law firm. She'd love to make the world a better place, she'd love to have a full-time boyfriend, but she also has bills to pay.

Jackson Reno – Reno is a detective for the Scottsdale Police Department and Laura's boyfriend. He takes his job seriously but he's never sure what to do with Laura.

Sophia Rodriguez – Laura's best friend who works for the law firm as the receptionist and paralegal. She sometimes gets out of the office to help Laura in her investigations. Sophie's a former California surfer chick and a free spirit who enjoys dating multiple men at the same time.

Gina Rondinelli – Laura's other best friend. She's a former Scottsdale police detective and the law firm's senior investigator. She has a strict moral code and likes playing by the rules.

Leonard Shapiro – Lenny is head of the law firm. He has no people skills but with the help of Laura, Sophie, and Gina, he usually wins his cases.

Anthony "Tough Tony" DiCenzo – Head of the local crime family. Through events over the last few months, he now owes Laura several favors. But more than that, he's slowly developing a soft spot for Laura.

Maximilien – The number-two man in the local crime family. He's attracted to Laura and would like to take the relationship further. Laura feels tempted, but she already has Reno as a boyfriend.

Gabriella – A former government operative from somewhere in eastern Europe. She currently works as a bodyguard for Tough Tony. She takes pleasure in hurting men.

Suzie Lu – A woman who lives on the floor below Laura in the apartment house. She's a Professor of Computer Engineering at Arizona State University. In her spare time, she's Mistress McNasty, a brutal dominatrix who caters to the city's wealthiest men.

Grandma Peckham – Laura's longtime neighbor who's recently begun dating again.

The Cougars – A group of wealthy, sexy, and fashionable women who like to troll the clubs of Scottsdale looking for athletic younger men for hook-up relationships. Through a series of adventures, Laura, Sophie, and Gina have become unofficial members of their group.

# Chapter One

August is a lousy time of year in Scottsdale. People are tired of being hot, tired of the monsoon rains, and tired of hearing about how great it is to live in a dry-heat.

This lousy August afternoon, I was watching a violent dust storm race towards me as I slowly baked to death on the top of a hill in the middle of the vast Sonoran Desert. I had climbed the hill to hide from a bunch of pissed-off guys who would almost certainly kill me if they found me.

I knew they were angry because I'd accidentally blown-up their entire arsenal of military weapons, supplies, and ammunition. I looked to my left, back across the desert and saw a column of thick black smoke billowing up from where I'd been less than half an hour earlier.

The temperature on the hill was approaching a hundred and ten. My mouth was dry with thirst, my head pounding from inhaling toxic fumes, and my eyes burning from the glare of the desert sun. Due to dehydration, I'd stopped sweating and I was becoming dizzy from the heat.

As I sat with my back against a rock, I looked to the right and watched as the wall of brown dust climbed high in the sky above me. The storm was a monster, even by Arizona standards. The wall of flying sand and dirt was over a mile high and stretched from horizon to horizon. Winds of sixty miles an hour would act to sandblast anything caught in its path. I knew that within minutes I would face the full force of the punishing storm.

As I waited for the first particles of sand to slam into my exposed skin, I thought about how I'd ended up here.

It had started innocently enough, the week before, on a Monday. I'd been sitting at my kitchen table, drinking an after-lunch coffee and flipping through a stack of unpaid bills, when there was a knock on my door.

I wasn't expecting anyone so I grabbed my purse, which held my Baby Glock, and went into the living room. Lately, I've noticed I feel more comfortable if my gun is nearby. Probably the result of being attacked too many times. I stood off to the side and talked through the door.

"Hello?"

“Laura,” came a woman’s voice from the other side. “It’s Suzie Lu. Do you have a minute to talk?”

I felt the tension leave my body as I opened the door and let Suzie in.

Suzie’s a thin athletic woman with Asian heritage. She has long black hair, expressive dark eyes, and a beautiful smile. She’s a professor of computer engineering at Arizona State University, about five miles to the south in Tempe. She’s several years older than I am and lives on the second floor of my apartment building. In her spare time, she’s a professional dominatrix called Mistress McNasty. She runs the business out of her apartment and has a steady stream of men who need to be punished and disciplined. I don’t know her all that well, but she’s helped me out with assignments in the past.

When I’d seen her previously, she usually had on an outfit that was provocative and revealing. Today she wore a simple blue V-neck knitted shirt and a pair of white denim shorts. She looked a little shaken and upset.

Suzie sat on the couch next to my cat, Marlowe. He woke up from his nap, saw a stranger in the apartment, and ran into the bedroom. I went to the fridge, pulled out a half-full bottle of white wine from the night before, and held it up. Suzie looked at me with a smile of relief.

“Oh, yes. That would be great, thanks.”

After pouring the remaining wine into two glasses, I came over and sat in a chair next to her. We each took a couple of sips and sat in silence for a moment.

“I’m not sure if you can help me,” she said, “but I think there’s a problem and I don’t know what to do.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“A client of mine is missing.”

“Missing?”

“I don’t know what else to call it. His name is John. He missed an appointment this morning and didn’t even call. I know something’s happened.”

“John?”

“No, it’s his real name. I won’t let any of my guys use an alias. It makes it more personal that way.”

“Have you called any of his family or friends? If something’s happened, somebody should know something.”

“I called a friend of his. He’s also a client, but he didn’t know anything about it. You see, the thing is, John travels for business and it’s not unusual for him to take off somewhere on short notice. I’m not sure how long it will be before someone figures out he’s missing and calls the police. It could be a week.”

“Maybe he went on a business trip and forgot he had an appointment?”

“No, impossible. He has an appointment every Monday morning from nine to noon. He’s under strict discipline and knows the consequences of not letting me know if he needs to postpone. It’s something else.”

Suzie leaned closer to me and lowered her voice. “I never talk about business with my clients, but he mentioned a couple of times last week that he was worried that something was going to happen.”

“Did he say what?”

“No and I didn’t press him on it. But I could tell something was weighing on his mind.”

“I’m not sure what I can do to help. I work as an investigator at a law office. Missing persons usually go to the police. Why don’t you call them and tell them you suspect something?”

Suzie shook her head. “I don’t think it would be a good idea if Mistress McNasty called in his disappearance. Discretion is one of the things my clients value most. If anyone found out I was talking to the police, it would be the end of my business.”

“You could go to a pay phone and call in a tip.”

“I’ve thought about that, too, but I don’t think the police would take an anonymous call as something real. Besides, I don’t even know where there is a pay phone in Scottsdale anymore. I was thinking if I went through a lawyer, they’d be forced to take it seriously. Plus, maybe I could keep my name out of it.”

“You want to hire Lenny to tell the police your client’s missing? I’m sure he’d do it, but he’s pretty expensive. You’d be talking at least four or five thousand, probably more.”

At that, Suzie’s face lit up and she started to laugh. It was a great laugh and hearing it quickly put me in a good mood.

“Laura, I’m sorry. I guess you don’t know me very well yet. Do you have any idea how much I make? I have more money than I know how to spend.”

“I remember the last time we worked together. You said the guy you were training was paying you a hundred dollars an hour. It seemed like a lot.”

“Oh, that was just an introductory offer. The man you saw was in the process of auditioning to be one of the boys in my stable. The first couple of sessions are at a discount, so we can get to know each other and decide if it’s something we both want to continue or not. Most of my long-term clients pay more, usually five hundred to a thousand dollars an hour.”

*You’ve got to be kidding me.*

“Sometime you’ll need to tell me exactly what it is you do to make them pay you that much,” I said. “But, no problem. As long as you have the money, I’m sure Lenny will be glad to take you on.”

As if on cue, my phone rang with Sophie’s ringtone, Rihanna’s *S&M*. Hearing the music made Suzie cock her head to the side and smile.

“Hey, chica,” I said. “What’s up?”

“I think Lenny has something new for you and Gina. He wants you both here for a client appointment at four o’clock. He didn’t say anything about you coming in early, so there’s no need to rush. He has another appointment coming in soon, so he’ll be busy for the next hour or so. But if you’re not busy, come in early anyway. Gina’s been out all day and I could use the company.”

“Okay, give me an hour and I’ll be in. Oh, I have a new client for him. When’s his next free appointment.”

“You pick up another stray? Lenny’ll like that. It shows initiative.”

I heard the sound of Sophie typing. “Let’s see,” she said. “He’s free tomorrow morning at nine.”

“Would nine o’clock tomorrow work?” I asked Suzie. She nodded.

“Perfect,” I said to Sophie. “The client is Suzie Lu.”

“Suzie Lu? The lady with the handcuffs and whips?”

“Yup.”

“This should be interesting.” I heard the sound of more typing. “Okay, she’s in the book.”

~~~~~

My name is Laura Black. At one time, I had visions of becoming a world-famous movie actress, starring in all the summer action-adventure blockbusters. I’d wear skimpy outfits while my handsome co-star and I fought on the side of good against evil drug lords and international terrorists. My fallback career choice was being the next Mother Theresa, living a simple life of poverty while helping the poor and fighting for justice.

Now that reality’s set in, I’ve found myself as an investigator in a small law office in Scottsdale, Arizona. The hours are terrible, the work alternates between being boring and being terrifying, and I’m not all that great at what I do. But it pays the rent and I’ve made some good friends along the way. Sometimes, I’m even able to make a positive difference in someone’s life. That’s enough to keep me going.

~~~~~

I locked my apartment, went down the stairs, and out to the back parking lot. I hit the remote to unlock my car, a cappuccino-colored Accord. Although I always try to take care of my car, my current line of work has caused a few cosmetic issues. The driver’s side front fender is somewhat crushed, the mirror is loosely held on with duct tape, there is some scraped paint on the door, and there’s a bullet hole in the rear quarter-panel. These modifications occurred while investigating some members of the Russian mafia back in January.

The passenger side has a large gash in the front fender. This had happened in March. It was caused by a hatchet thrown at my head by a guy from a Mexican drug cartel. At the time, he was upset with me because I’d just shot a stream of wasp spray in his face. Fortunately, the hatchet missed my head. Unfortunately, it embedded itself in the fender.

My trunk lid doesn't close anymore because the latch is broken. This happened in June when my friend Chugger McIntyre used a crowbar to pop it open. This was fine with me since I'd been trapped in the trunk at the time and had already passed out with heatstroke. Chugger felt bad about breaking the latch and gave me a bungee cord to hold down the lid. Unfortunately, every time I go over a bump, the lid to my trunk loudly bounces up and down. I know I should probably get a new car, but it still runs surprising well. Besides, I'd hate to destroy a new one. Better to have this one slowly demolished one piece at a time.

~~~~~

I drove to the office, parked in my assigned space, and went in through the rear security door. I dropped my bag off at my cubicle in the back offices, then went up front to talk to Sophie. Miss Sophia Rodriguez not only does the paralegal stuff and answers phones for Lenny, she's also my best friend.

I opened the door to the reception area and saw the front door to the street was propped open. Sophie was nowhere to be seen.

I took two steps into the reception area and was hit with the stench of a wet dog. It only took me a second to place the smell. I quickly walked out the open door to the street. Sophie was standing on the sidewalk with a look of misery on her face. Her mascara was smeared from her eyes tearing.

"Oh my God," I said. "Amber? What was Amber doing here?"

Amber was a train-wreck of a girl Lenny met at a nightclub a few months ago. She'd been looking for work, so Lenny invited her to interview for an open admin position. During the interview, she seduced him and got the job. She then spent the next couple of weeks collecting a paycheck while doing no work. We eventually got rid of her and I thought we'd seen the last of her, but I guess I was wrong.

"I wish I knew," Sophie said, wiping her eyes. "Lenny had an appointment in the book with Ambrosia Elliot and her counsel. I had no idea it was Amber until Miss Smells-Like-a-Toilet walked into the office with her lawyer. Is that the same perfume? It seems to stink worse this time."

"It's the same. A cross between a wet dog kennel and burning roadkill."

We heard Gina Rondinelli swearing in the reception area. A few seconds later, she too came out to the sidewalk. Gina's the senior investigator and has been my mentor since I joined the firm, almost three years ago. Before she started working for Lenny, Gina was a Scottsdale police detective. She's as tough as they come and doesn't take crap from anyone, well, except us.

"Amber?" Gina asked. "What was Amber doing back in the office?"

"Don't know," Sophie said. "Lenny put her in the book, but didn't say anything about it. She went into the conference room with her lawyer and they talked with Lenny for about half an hour. When they left, Amber looked smug and Lenny looked pissed. He took off right after they did."

"I was afraid of that," Gina said, sounding a little frustrated. "I knew it was too easy to get rid of her last time. I had the feeling she'd be back."

"You think she's coming back to work?" I asked.

"I'm thinking work is the least of our problems with Amber," Gina said. "But let's see what Lenny says when he comes back."

"It shouldn't be too long," Sophie said. "When he took off, he was mumbling about needing a pack of cigarettes."

"I thought he was trying to quit," I said.

"Looks like Amber has that effect on people," Sophie said.

"I'm all for hearing what Lenny has to say," I said. "But I'm going to walk around back and open the rear door. We need to air out the place."

"God yes, please do," Sophie said. "I'll take a hot office over that stench. When Amber walked in and her odor hit me, I threw up a little bit in my mouth, seriously. If I have to sit in that stink for much longer, I'll probably toss my cookies all over the reception area."

"Well, that'd be an improvement over Amber's perfume," Gina said. "But airing the office out would be a good idea."

Leaving Sophie at the open front door, Gina and I walked around to the back. She opened the door and I propped it open with a cinderblock. We then walked back around to the front and waited almost five minutes before we ventured back into the office.

~~~~~

Lenny showed up about fifteen minutes later. He looked tired and defeated. The only other time I've seen him looking this bad was after he'd lost a case in court. He shuffled past the three of us and stood in his office door.

"I'm glad you're all here," he said. "Give me a few minutes to get down a couple shots of Beam and light up a cigarette. Then come in and let's discuss how we're going to handle this Amber thing."

He walked into his office and his door slowly swung shut.

"Wow," Sophie said. "Lenny looks like shit."

"I doubt Lenny will be able to handle this on his own," Gina said. "I'm sure it'll be up to us to dig him out of it."

"You mean like always?" Sophie asked with a giggle.

"Right," Gina said. "Let's treat this like any other assignment and start at the beginning."

"We need to dig into Amber's background," I said.

"I still have the paperwork she signed when she blew her way into the job," Sophie said. "I'll be glad to have the secret software take a crack at her. I can probably have a preliminary report later this afternoon and the full report sometime tomorrow."

"Let's start with the standard searches," Gina said. "Credit reports, public records, and employment histories. If that doesn't show anything, use the government software."

Our magic government software came as a result of a case the year before when we helped out the DEA. By entering a name and any other random things you have on someone, millions of files in a secret government database are sifted through and you can find out the background details on almost anyone. We're pretty sure we shouldn't still have access to it and we've been waiting for the men-in-black to show up and remove it.

~~~~~

Ten minutes later, the three of us walked into Lenny's office. He was sitting behind his desk with a half-full glass of Jim Beam on the rocks and a freshly lit cigarette between his fingers. From the remnants in the ashtray,

he was already on his third one. He seemed lost in thought and was startled when we walked in.

“How bad is it?” Gina asked as we gathered around Lenny’s desk.

“Well, it appears Miss Amber Elliot wasn’t very happy when we let her go,” Lenny said. “She’s now represented by counsel to pursue a case of physical sexual harassment and unlawful discharge against us. They’ve already contacted the EEOC and it seems they are more than willing to take this to trial.”

“But she was the one who seduced you into giving her the job,” Sophie said. “How is that you harassing her?”

Gina slowly shook her head, a sad and knowing look on her face.

“Well,” Lenny said, “harassment of the type alleged is typically difficult to prove since it’s usually a ‘he said, she said’ situation. Unfortunately, Amber seems to have walked into the interview knowing full well what she was doing. According to her counsel, she ‘accidentally’ turned on the voice recorder function of her phone and recorded the entire thing.”

“Uh oh,” Sophie said. “That can’t be good.”

“During the interview, Amber repeatedly used the phrase ‘What do I need to do to get the job?’ According to her counsel, this is when I, um, encouraged her to perform a, um, physical act on me as an implied condition of employment.”

“That doesn’t sound so good either,” Sophie said.

“And then,” Lenny said, “according to Amber, I approached her after she started working and again demanded favors. She said when she refused, she was fired.”

The three of us looked at Lenny.

“No, I didn’t. Stop looking at me like that.”

“So, she has a case?” I asked.

“Quite possibly,” Lenny said, pausing to puff on his cigarette. “It’s my own fault. No matter who starts it, there are some things you can’t do when it comes to employment. I’ve opened us up for a tangled mess of harassment and employment actions.”

“Did they offer you terms for a settlement?” Gina asked.

“Well, that’s the strange part. They only offered one settlement option. We can go to trial or I can let Amber come back here to work.”

“Oh, please God, no,” Sophie said. “Go to trial. You’re *really* good in court. I’m *sure* you could win.”

The three of us looked at her.

“What? I don’t think I can handle having her back. I’m serious. I know Amber’s perfume doesn’t seem to bother the rest of you, but you don’t know how close I was to tossing my lunch all over the office when she walked in today.”

“What’s wrong with Amber’s perfume?” Lenny asked. “I think it smells great. It sort of reminds me of a being in a sorority house on a hot summer night.”

“Eeeewww” Sophie and I said together.

“There must be more to it,” Gina said, ignoring us. “Why would Amber go through all of this trouble just to get back an admin job? There’s something we aren’t seeing.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing,” Lenny said. “But at the moment I have no idea what it could be. She starts back here tomorrow. I need everyone to be polite and not antagonize her. Besides, now that Annie’s gone back to school full-time to get her bachelor’s, we do need another admin.”

“We’ll work on finding out what’s really going on,” Gina said. She had a soothing, almost motherly tone to her voice. “Sophie’s going to do a background search. After she does that, Laura and I will track down whatever leads she digs up.”

“Yeah, okay,” Lenny, said. “I like that. Let me know what you find out.”

He looked over at Sophie. “What else do we have going on today and tomorrow?”

“You have that new truck company guy at four today and another new client tomorrow morning at nine.”

“Shit, I don’t know if I’m up for two new clients right now,” Lenny said. “What’s the one tomorrow? Another domestic with a cheating spouse?”

“It’s one I brought in,” I said. “Her name is Suzie Lu and one of her clients is missing. She wants you to go to the police and formally report him as missing so they’ll make a serious attempt at finding the guy. She wants to keep her name out of it.”

“Why? Is she a hooker?”

“Sort of. She works as a dominatrix and goes by the name Mistress McNasty.”

“What?” Lenny’s eyes opened wide. “Did you say Mistress McNasty? You’re serious? There really is a woman named Mistress McNasty? She’s living in Scottsdale?”

“Yeah, there is,” I said. “What about her?”

Lenny paused to take a couple of puffs on his cigarette and a long sip of his bourbon. His eyes got all dreamy and unfocused. “I always thought Mistress McNasty was an urban legend, sort of like Bigfoot. I started hearing about her at cocktail parties around ten years ago. She’s supposedly the best there is. From what I’ve heard, her clients are usually at the CEO level or above. What about this client of hers? What’s up with him?”

“His name is John and he didn’t show up for an appointment this morning. She thinks he’s recently been threatened by someone. She’s concerned he could be in trouble and is willing to pay to get the police involved.”

“Aren’t all her clients named John?” Lenny asked.

“She said it was his real name.”

“Is this the same Mistress McNasty who helped us out with the diamonds a while back?” Gina asked. “The one who lives in your apartment house?”

“What?” Lenny asked. “Mistress McNasty lives in the same building as you? Hold on. Are we talking about the same Mistress McNasty? You know, wealthy men, whips, shackles, blindfolds?”

“Why would a woman with that much wealth be living in your apartment house?” Gina asked. “No offense, Laura, I like your apartment, but it’s not the kind of place where you’d expect someone like that to live.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I never thought about it. I guess we’ll find out.”

I looked at Lenny. “Sophie said you had something for Gina and me?”

“Oh, yeah. The new client coming in at four today, the truck company guy. Since you’ll be booked for the next week or two, plus the Amber thing,” he said, pointing at Gina, “this assignment will most likely be for you,” he continued, pointing at me. “But it would be good if you both could be here for the initial appointment.”

“Sure,” Gina said. “What kind of assignment is it?”

“It’s an industrial harassment case that might need some legwork. The client’s the office manager for a trucking company located up in the Scottsdale Industrial Airpark. Have either of you heard of Arizona Transnational Express?”

We both looked at Lenny and shook our heads.

“Well, apparently, they’re being harassed by one of the other trucking companies in town, Southwest Desert Transport. They’ve gone to the police, but the harassment is continuing. They’re thinking that bringing suit against the other company may be the only way to get the harassment to stop. Other than that, I don’t know a lot about the case. The client will be here at four o’clock.” Lenny looked down at his Rolex. “Shit, that’s in about forty-five minutes.”

“I’ll be here,” I said.

“Same with me,” Gina added.

Lenny pushed the glass toward Sophie so she could take it to the dishwasher in the break room. “It would be good if you could also sit in and take notes,” he said to her. “I always get a little lost in these initial meetings when the client starts throwing names at me.” He reached for the pack of cigarettes. “Okay, everybody leave me alone for a while. Let me think about what to do about Amber.”

The three of us went out to the reception area and shut Lenny’s door behind us. We kept Sophie company while she went through the complicated database login procedure and started the search on Amber.

“How’d your date on Saturday go?” I asked as she typed. “Wasn’t this the Arizona Cardinals guy? What was his name? Cobra or something?”

“It was okay. His name’s Snake McCoy and yeah, last week the Cardinals signed him to a one-year contract as an emergency backup quarterback. The

date was sort of a group thing. There were three other couples and we went to the Dakota nightclub to celebrate.”

“I love that place,” Gina said. “I haven’t been there since we went with the cougars a couple of months ago.”

“Yeah, it was great. One of the managers recognized me as being a puma and he let us sit at one of the big reserved tables.”

“He actually signed a contract with the Cardinals?” I asked. “It’s been almost two years since he played at ASU. Is he still any good?”

“I don’t know. He only got the league minimum salary, so I would say probably not. But considering he’ll get almost half a million dollars for five months of tossing a football around during practice, he feels pretty good about it. Plus, if something weird happens and he actually gets to play in a game, he’ll get a lot more.”

“I’d feel good about it, too,” Gina said. “What’s he going to do with the money?”

“Don’t know. He spent a couple thousand on champagne for everyone and he got a Cardinals’ logo tattooed on his arm.”

“Hopefully he doesn’t get traded,” I said. “That could be awkward.”

“Are you going to see him again?” Gina asked.

“Probably. He seems alright. But he’s going to be busy with the training camp thing, so it’ll be a couple of weeks before we can do anything. Of course, if the Cardinals do well this year, maybe I’ll be invited to a Super Bowl. I’ve never been to one of those.”

“What about Milo?” Gina asked. “Have you stopped seeing him?”

Sophie gave a small snort of disgust. “I don’t know what to do about him. We get along okay, then he starts talking about getting serious and moving in together. I don’t need that. Well, at least not with him. Every time he asks, we get in a fight and I stop taking his phone calls.”

“Well,” I said, “until you start to get horny.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said, “that’s usually when I break down and start seeing him again. The man does have his talents.”

“Well,” Gina said, as she eyed both Sophie and me. “You know my advice.”

“I know,” I said. “Dating a criminal isn’t very smart and it will only lead to heartache.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said. “But dating any man leads to heartache, so really, what’s the difference?”

Gina only shook her head and let out a small sigh of frustration.

~~~~~

The client arrived and the three of us introduced ourselves. His name was Mike Malloy. He was a thin and spindly kind of guy. He looked to be about thirty-seven or thirty-eight, had short dishwater-blond hair, and a nervous smile.

Lenny’s door opened and he walked out to greet the client. He’d composed himself and looked much better. I heard the sound of traffic coming from his office and knew he’d opened the window to help clear out the smoke.

We introduced him to Mike Malloy, then we all went into Lenny’s office. Sophie sat in the back by the open door, in case her desk phone rang or someone came into the office.

“Alright,” Lenny said to the client after we’d all found a seat. “Tell me about your current situation and what you’d like to have happen.”

“It’s like I told you over the phone,” Mike said. “My company has an office in North Scottsdale, at the airpark. We’ve been in the same location for almost fifteen years. We’re one of the trucking companies taking advantage of something called the CANAMEX corridor that was set up as part of the NAFTA regulations two decades ago. We have direct routes from British Columbia and Alberta all the way down to Guadalajara and Mexico City. Going direct cuts our operating costs compared to companies who have to offload and reload every time they go over a border.”

“When did the trouble start?” Lenny asked.

“Strange things started happening about three weeks ago. It began as graffiti and some slashed trailer tires. Last week there were a couple of small fires. One was in an outdoor garbage bin and one was started in a pile

of wooden pallets in the lot behind our warehouse. Neither of them spread to a structure, but either certainly could have. I think they'll keep trying until they start a serious fire."

"Nothing before three weeks ago?" Gina asked.

"No, nothing."

"You think you know who's behind it?" Gina asked.

"I know some of the other transportation companies don't like the fact that we can undercut them on price. It could be any of them, but I suspect a company called Southwest Desert Transport."

"Based on what evidence?" Gina asked.

"I really don't have a smoking gun, but one of our drivers got into a fight with one of their employees a week before the trouble started. Plus, I've seen some of their rigs drive past our offices at odd times of the day and night. We're nowhere near their offices, so it seems strange to see them."

"What else do you know about them?" Gina asked.

"They're a relatively new company. I think they've had their Scottsdale location running for less than a year. They also run the same routes on the CANAMEX corridor."

"You've been to the police?" Gina asked.

"Yes, but they said they needed something more substantial to go on. They sent a detective out last week. He asked a lot of questions and took some pictures. Honestly, until someone gets killed or there's a major fire, I don't think they'll be all that interested. We've hired a night-time security guard and set up some cameras, but still haven't found any evidence of who's behind it."

Lenny looked over at me. "Okay," I said. "I'll look into it." I looked over at Mike. "If you'll be there, I'll come over tomorrow morning and look around."

"Sure," Mike said. "Give me a call before you stop by, but I should be there all day."

"Assuming we can gather some solid evidence against them," Lenny said, "we can either confront them directly to have the harassment stop or we can present our evidence to the police and push them for results. We'll also have

the option of bringing a civil suit for any damages caused by the other company.”

Although Lenny had only casually tossed out the idea of a civil suit, we knew that was his ultimate goal. Gathering evidence for the police would only result in some billable hours. A nice chunk of change, but not as much as a multimillion-dollar judgment in a civil suit. From Lenny’s point of view, a large warehouse fire with solid evidence of who set it would be the best possible outcome.

# Chapter Two

The three of us went out to the reception area while Lenny discussed his fee structure with the client. Sophie went to the printer and started flipping through a stack of papers.

“Have any results come back on Amber?” Gina asked.

“It’s printing out now, but I didn’t see anything unusual. She grew up in North Scottsdale. Went to Chaparral High School and graduated a semester late. Went to the Scottsdale Culinary Institute for about five months before she dropped out. Tried to go to Arizona State for a psychology degree, but that only lasted two semesters before she quit that, too. She’s worked odd jobs as a pizza delivery driver, a bartender, at a pet shop, and at a tattoo parlor. None of her jobs last more than a couple of months.”

She flipped through the paperwork until she found the page with the financials. “She’s in debt for about eighteen thousand on her six existing cards. She’s missed a few payments and her credit is shit. Now she gets turned down whenever she applies for a new card.”

“But there’s nothing to indicate why she’s here?” Gina asked.

“Nope,” Sophie said. “She’s just your average loser.”

“How can she afford a lawyer?” I said. “Unless the guy’s working contingency, it would have cost Amber four or five thousand dollars just to have counsel walk in with her today.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Gina said. “Okay, let’s have the DEA software do a deep dive. Bank records, family, friends, anything you can find to show how she’s financing this.”

“Already on it,” Sophie said. “I should have some answers by tomorrow morning.”

Gina walked into the back offices to do some paperwork while Sophie and I waited for Mike Malloy to finish up with Lenny.

“Doing anything fun tonight?” Sophie asked.

“Going to dinner with Reno. We’re both on the same shift today and I wanted to get in at least one dinner before things get crazy around here

again.”

“How’s it going with him? You know, your eyes don’t twinkle like they used to when you talk about him.”

“No, we’re okay. Reno and I still get along great. We always have a nice time when we’re together.”

“And?” Sophie asked. I knew by her tone what she wanted to know.

“And, yes, the sex is still great. Well, whenever we can coordinate our jobs so we can actually be together. The last time I spent more than an overnight with him was almost two months ago, right after we found the treasure chest for Elizabeth.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Alright, and no, he’s not Max.” When I said his name, I couldn’t help but smile.

“You see? That’s the twinkle I’m talking about. You want Max and he wants you. We’ve had this conversation before. Why don’t you end it with Reno and start up with Max? For real this time.”

“Well, I won’t say it hasn’t crossed my mind. When Max was in the hospital after the bombing, I ended up spending a lot of time visiting with him and talking about his life. We actually have a lot in common.”

“How’s he doing with that? I still can’t believe Carlos the Butcher tried to kill Tough Tony with a cake bomb at Danica’s wedding. Tony would have gotten blown-up for sure if it hadn’t been for your warning and Max tackling the cake right before it blew up. Max was in the hospital for almost a week after that. Has he fully recovered yet?”

“He’s a lot better, but he doesn’t like to talk about it. I know he still goes to physical therapy a couple of times a week. All he’ll say is he’s stiff in the morning and that he’s added an interesting new scar to his collection.”

“I like a man who’s stiff in the morning. Has anything happened with you two yet?”

“Well, you know I’ve been going over to Tony’s offices and searching through their personnel files for any trace of Carlos’ men. I told you how

Max was there the last time and how he helped me look through the records. It was so hard sitting next to him, talking with him, and smelling that cologne of his. All I wanted to do was rip his shirt off. I also told you he took me to dinner after we were done. I didn't tell you I let him kiss me and almost took him up on his offer to go back to his place."

"Oh, you naughty girl. Sounds like you still have it bad for him."

"And it's not getting better. I swear, the more I try not to think of him, the worse it gets. But you know I can't be with Max. Gina's been right all along. Being with someone involved in organized crime can't end well. Plus, I know I could be happy with Reno. He keeps telling me he loves me and I know he's sincere. He's everything I could want in a boyfriend or even a husband. I can even see someday having kids with Reno. He'd make a good dad."

"Only he's not Max?"

I let out a long sigh. "Exactly."

My cell phone rang and I pulled it out of my back pocket. The number was local, but I didn't recognize it. Sophie looked at me and I shrugged my shoulders. I hit the button to answer.

"Hello?"

"Laura Black, this is Tony DiCenzo. I trust you are doing well."

Upon hearing DiCenzo's voice, my stomach did a hard twist. Crazy as it sounds, I've become friends with the head of the largest crime organization in Arizona. But friends or not, hearing his voice unexpectedly would be enough to scare anyone.

"Hi, Tony," I said, trying not to sound like I was about to throw up. "I'm doing great today. What can I do for you?"

I looked over at Sophie. Her eyes had gotten big and she was crossing herself.

"I hate to impose upon your time, but I've recently hired some new men for the security team. They've passed through our internal screening process, but you know how that's failed me in the past. I was wondering if you'd have time over the next few days to take a look at them. I'd like to know if any of Carlos' men have penetrated into my organization."

“Sure, I’ll be glad to help out. But keep in mind that I don’t know all of the men in the Black Death. Some may still get through.”

“I understand your doubts, but you’ve personally seen many of the top people in Carlos’ cartel. I’m sure it would be one of these men who would try to come at us in this manner.”

“At the moment, I’m open all tomorrow afternoon. When and where?”

“That works out well. Thank you for accommodating me. Do you remember about eight months ago? When we had a large meeting that concerned the exchange of some merchandise? The meeting that ended with a large bang? We’ll be holding a meeting for the new recruits in the same location.”

“I won’t forget that meeting anytime soon,” I said. “It was the second time you and I had gotten together.”

Tony chuckled, as if reliving a pleasant memory. “I’m glad you remember it. When you come up, you can see how I had it rebuilt. The inside is more functional now. Like I said, we’ll be holding a meeting there with all the new recruits. It will partially be an orientation and partially be a chance to have you look them over.”

“Tony, that building is sort of in the middle of nowhere. Wouldn’t you rather have the meeting in one of your hotels?”

“Truth be told, Laura Black, if you do happen to spot one of Carlos’ men among the recruits, things might get a little loud. I wouldn’t want to have that kind of activity around my hotel guests.”

“And by loud, you mean — ?”

The phone became silent. The kind of silent when you know the person on the other end is still there, but they aren’t talking.

“Oh,” I said. “Right, what time?”

“The meeting will be at three o’clock. Would you like a driver to pick you up?”

“No, I remember where it is.”

“Very well. Until tomorrow, Laura Black.” He then disconnected.

*Shit.*

“That was Tough Tony DiCenzo, wasn’t it?” Sophie asked. “I don’t know why you agreed to help him fight against Carlos the Butcher and the *Muerte Negro*. It seems like you’re putting yourself in a lot of danger just to get a chance to be around Max. You know, all you’d have to do is give him a phone call and he’d be happy to hang out with you anytime you wanted.”

“It’s not only to be around Max. Tony needs my help. I know it doesn’t make a lot of sense, but I think Tony’s the good guy here. He’s doing his part to help protect Scottsdale against some really bad people. I feel obliged to help.”

“So, helping Tough Tony DiCenzo has become one of your saving-the-world projects? You know, one of these days you’re going to get killed trying to save the world. Won’t that be ironic as hell?”

~~~~~

I got back to my apartment building at about six. I needed to change clothes and touch-up my makeup. I wasn’t meeting Reno until seven thirty, so I didn’t need to rush. Stepping into the elevator, I held the door open for a man I recognized. It was Grandpa Bob and he’d been dating my next-door neighbor Grandma Peckham for about two months. In his hands, Grandpa Bob was tightly gripping a brown-paper sack.

I was happy Grandma had someone new in her life. Her husband passed away several years ago and I knew she was lonely. What I didn’t like was that my bedroom and Grandma’s shared a common wall. It always gave me the heebie-jeebies when I woke up in the middle of the night to hear Grandma moaning and her headboard thumping against the wall. I’ve only mentioned it to her once. She sweetly said she understood because my thumping headboard had also kept her up a time or two. After that, I’d dropped the subject.

“Hello, cookie,” Grandpa Bob said as he shuffled into the elevator. “What’s shaking? Nab any crooks lately?”

Grandpa Bob thinks I’m a police detective. I’ve tried to explain what I do, but nothing I tell him seems to stick. I’ve learned to just go with it.

“As many as I can, but it’s a big city.”

“Well, you keep after it. Crime never sleeps.”

“Where are you and Grandma going tonight?”

“We’re staying in.” He held up his bag. “I brought the wine and Mary’s cooking Italian. A nice bottle of Chianti always puts her in the mood.”

Note to self, make sure to put in the earplugs before I go to sleep tonight.

“I’m having Italian tonight, too,” I said. “My boyfriend’s taking me to Frankie Z’s.”

“Say, I’ve been there before. That’s the killer-diller joint up on Hayden. They have a great early-bird special.”

The elevator door opened to my floor. “After dinner, we’re going to watch a movie Mary picked out,” Grandpa Bob said as he stepped out. “Something about a magic wedding dress that makes men fall in love with whoever wears it. She likes stuff like that.”

“Not your favorite?”

“Not really. I’ll take a Humphrey Bogart adventure over any of these new movies. Have you ever seen *Casablanca*? It’s the best movie of all time. And they didn’t need to swear and there wasn’t a lot of blood.”

“I’ve seen that one,” I said. “You’re right about it being a great movie.”

I reached the door to my apartment. Grandpa made it to Grandma Peckham’s door and knocked.

“Say hello to Grandma for me. Let me know how the magic dress movie is.”

~~~~~

I got to Frankie Z’s a little after seven thirty. After Frankie scolded me for being too skinny, she led me through the lounge. Her son, Little Zappy was at his usual station behind the bar and he waved as I walked through. Frankie led me to a corner table in the back room. Reno was already there, working on a scotch. A second scotch sat in front of the empty seat next to him.

He was still dressed in his work clothes, which consisted of a faded Aloha shirt, blue jeans, and a pair of well-worn cowboy boots. While not fancy, it did help him blend in while doing surveillance work, plus the loose Aloha shirt made it easy for him to hide his service pistol. He stood up and held his arms out. I snuggled in for a quick hug. As always, being in Reno’s

arms, even if for only a moment, gave me a feeling of being safe and of being loved. All thoughts of Max vanished.

*Why does romance have to be so confusing?*

“How was your day?” I asked.

“Uneventful. We’re still chasing down some heroin that’s made its way into Scottsdale. So far, it’s been a lot of dead ends. What about you?”

“Looks like I’m going to gather evidence that one trucking company is harassing another. So far, it’s only been some property damage and even that’s been minor. But if something major happens and we have evidence who did it, Lenny will make a civil case for damages.”

“And collect his forty percent fee?”

“It’s how these things work.”

Mario the waiter came by and we each ordered our usual. Reno spent a minute munching a breadstick while I sipped my scotch.

“Do you think we can plan a getaway sometime soon?” I asked. “Let’s take off after work on a Friday and drive up to Las Vegas or over to San Diego. Even a weekend in Rocky Point would be wonderful. We could splash around on the beach, drink some cerveza, and forget about the real world for a while.”

“I like the Rocky Point idea. When do you think you’ll be off? I’m scheduled to work this weekend, but I’m supposedly off the next.”

“So far, there isn’t anything planned,” I said. “But it’s almost two weeks from now and anything can happen. Let’s plan on it and make it work. Where do you want to stay? The Playa Bonita or the Penasco del Sol? We could even rent a house in Las Conchas.”

“Let’s stick with a hotel,” he said. “If we get a house, it will mean a deposit and if we cancel, it will be impossible to get it back. A hotel will work. Besides, if the night is dark enough, I’ll take you out to the beach. I’ll even bring a big towel.”

“Sex on the beach? Is that all you think about?” Even as I said it, I couldn’t help smiling. Sex on the beach sounded like an excellent idea.

“So? I’m a man with needs. Are you coming over to my place tonight?”

“Your place? What will the neighbors say?”

“They think it’s unusual when you aren’t over there. You’ve got your towel hanging on your own towel rack. Your toothbrush is sitting on my bathroom sink. My medicine cabinet is filled with your makeup. And about a third of my closet holds various shirts, dresses, skirts, and shoes of yours that have accumulated over the past few months. You even have a drawer for your socks and underwear.”

“I know, sorry. I’m starting to take over. Do you mind?”

“Of course not. Bring over as much stuff as you want. Tonight, for instance.”

“As a matter of fact, the outfit I want for tomorrow is hanging in your closet. Would you mind if I left this dirty outfit at your house tonight?”

“You want to take over my closets and have me do your laundry?”

“Well, whenever I’m there, we don’t seem to have time to do laundry. You know what we do instead.”

“You’re right. It’s a fair trade.”

He seemed to think for a second. “How good do I need to do your laundry?”

“What do you mean, how good?”

“Do you just want clean clothes or do you want fabric softener, too?”

“Why, what do I have to do for that?”

Reno leaned over and whispered in my ear. My heart sped up a notch and I felt myself blushing a little. I sat back in my seat and thought of the kind of night we were going to have.

“Well, alright,” I said. “But it better be damn good fabric softener.”

~~~~~

Reno’s alarm went off at six thirty and I felt him roll out of bed. I love lying in bed, half awake, while I hear the sounds of Reno in the shower. At last, I felt a strong arm wrap around me and heard him telling me to get up. I sighed with defeat and climbed into the shower, ready to start the day.

~~~~~

I got to the office about eight thirty. Sophie was typing and already had several stacks of paper on her desk. Gina was walking through reception

carrying a cup of coffee. I took a sniff, but didn't detect Amber.

"When's Amber supposed to be here?" I asked.

"Don't know," Sophie said, "But Lenny's been in a good mood today. I didn't want to mess that up by asking him when the nasty little skank is due to come in. I had a light breakfast, just in case."

"If Amber's true to form," Gina said, "we shouldn't expect her too much before noon. Has the secret software come up with anything yet?"

"It's starting to trickle in," Sophie said. "The rest of the report should be here in an hour or two."

~~~~~

Suzie Lu arrived about a quarter to nine. Sophie already had the standard forms and contracts filled out.

I'd been a little concerned that Suzie might show up in some version of her Mistress McNasty costume, but when she walked through the front door, I saw my fears were misplaced. She wore a sleeveless red silk blouse, a mid-length navy skirt, and a double strand of pearls. Both her heels and her bag were Farucci and both looked new.

I introduced her to Sophie and Gina.

"Thanks for helping us out a few months ago," Gina said. "Our client was in a lot of trouble and you gave us a valuable clue for getting him out of it."

"All I did was help decrypt a locked spreadsheet file," Suzie said. "But I was glad to help. Did Laura tell you why I'm here? I'm worried that a client of mine is in some trouble."

"She did," Gina said. "If Lenny's only going to report him to the police, we should wrap this up in a few days. If you want us to help look for him, it might take longer. You'll need to give us all the information you have on him. The more information we have, the easier it'll be to locate him."

"Laura said that you don't do missing persons," Suzie said.

"We try not to," Gina said. "The police have better resources than we do and that's always the better way to go. But we've been known to look in conjunction with the police. Sometimes we dig up leads they miss."

"I'll talk to Leonard about that," Suzie said. "If the police are going to take their time on this, maybe I could use your help finding him."

The door to the inner office opened and Lenny walked out. He wore a suit and a tie. His hair was styled and was fluffier than normal. He was even wearing some of his high-dollar cologne. Apparently, he was trying to make a good impression on Suzie. I looked over at Sophie and saw her roll her eyes.

“Suzie Lu,” I said, “this is Leonard Shapiro.”

Suzie and Lenny shook hands.

“Thank you for meeting with me,” Suzie said. “I hope you’re able to help.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to help with your problem,” Lenny said in his serious-lawyer voice. “Laura said you have a client who’s missing. You’d like me to report it to the authorities and press them for follow-up. What kind of client is he?”

“Well, in addition to some teaching duties at ASU, I’m a professional dominatrix. I go by the name of Mistress McNasty. He’s one of my clients through that.”

A small shudder shook Lenny’s body. Gina and Sophie saw it, too. We looked at each other and smiled.

“Yes, I can see why you can’t have your name associated with your client,” Lenny said, still using his serious voice. “Alright, come into my office and we can discuss the details.”

By details, we knew that Lenny meant discussing how much this was going to cost her. They walked into his office and he closed the door.

“What do you bet Lenny waves his fee for three or four sessions with Mistress McNasty?” Sophie asked.

“Three or four sessions?” Gina asked. “I think he’d wave his fee for a chance to lick her boots.”

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Forty-five minutes later, the door to Lenny’s office opened and Suzie and Lenny came out.

“Sophie,” Lenny said. The serious-lawyer tone was starting to bug me. It was probably even obvious to Suzie this wasn’t how he normally talked. “Miss Lu has agreed to become a client of the firm. Would you help her

with the paperwork? I'll start working on how we'll approach the police. Please set up an appointment with the Detective-Lieutenant for tomorrow. He owes me a couple of favors and don't be shy reminding his admin if she stalls. We'll also be looking for the missing man independently of the police. Miss Lu can fill you in on his personal details."

The four of us went into the conference room where Sophie had Suzie sign the contracts and documents. Lenny retreated back into his office, most likely to smoke a cigarette and fantasize about being locked in a dungeon with Mistress McNasty.

"Okay," I said when Suzie had signed the paperwork. "We'll need to know everything you know about your client so we can help find him. First things first. You said his name is John?"

"That's right. John Scarpazzi."

*Oh, shit.*

"Johnny Scarpazzi?" I asked. "Um, is he about fifty years old and big? Like linebacker in the NFL big?" Gina and Sophie both turned to look at me.

"I'm assuming you know him?" Gina asked.

"I know him," I said. "Sophie, you've met him too."

Sophie gave me a puzzled look.

"Do you remember about eight months ago? We went to a big, um, meeting with lots of diamonds."

Sophie's eyes grew big. "Oh yeah, I remember. Big guy, did lots of, um, crowd control."

"That's the one."

"I see you already know John," Suzie said. "Do you know him well?"

"Well, we've met professionally a few times. Do you know what he does for a living?"

"I don't know the details," Suzie said. "He's rather secretive and I never pry into my client's personal life. I know it has something to do with the golf resorts. He's some sort of manager with one or two of those, I think. He sometimes talks about a problem or something going on at one of the resorts in Scottsdale. Sometimes he talks about having problems with other

groups of people. I assume he means people at the other golf resorts. I'm afraid I'm not going to be a lot of help when it comes to what he does for his career. He doesn't talk a lot about it and I don't ask a lot of questions."

"You said you talked to a friend of his. What did he know?"

"I talked to the man who originally introduced John to me. They've been golfing buddies for twenty years. When I called him, he said he hadn't talked to John in several weeks and had no idea where I could find him."

"Maybe I could find out some more information if I talked to him," I said. "Could you set up a meeting?"

"Well," Suzie said, "setting up meetings is tricky. Part of what my guys pay for is discretion. If you have questions, I could relay the information, but there are only a few clients of mine that would be willing to openly discuss anything associated with Mistress McNasty."

"Okay," I said. "That will make it a bit more of a challenge, but let's go over everything you know about John Scarpazzi, then Sophie will start the computer search."

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It took about an hour of Suzie talking and Sophie taking notes. Gina and I asked several questions, but eventually we had everything. Suzie then took off to ASU where she had a class to teach.

"Well," Gina said as we walked back out to reception. "Do you want to tell Lenny who we're looking for, or shall I? Mistress McNasty or not, he's going to throw a clot when he finds out who he's agreed to search for."

"Oh, I'll do it," I said. "I brought Suzie in and anything DiCenzo-related seems to go through me anyway."

Gina gave me a look of motherly disapproval, but didn't say anything about Tony DiCenzo or my dating choices. Sophie was standing at the printer, pulling out a handful of papers.

"Amber?" Gina asked.

"Yeah," Sophie said, "but you know how the secret software works. It always comes out as a bunch of random stuff and I'll need to organize it." She flipped through a few of the pages. "Well, she's not on the no-fly list and she's not on any of the terrorism watch lists. That's a relief. Um,

financially, she has about two hundred dollars in her checking account. No savings, no stocks, and no trust funds.” She flipped through a few more pages. “She has two older sisters who are both doing well. One’s a doctor at Scottsdale Memorial. One’s a manager at Intel in Chandler. Her mom died several years ago and her dad’s an attorney in Phoenix.”

“Attorney?” Gina asked. “Where does he work?”

“Um,” Sophie said as she shuffled through the stack, “he’s a partner at Perkins, Elliot, & McMann.”

“Oh, damn.” I said.

“That explains it,” Gina said.

“That explains what?” Sophie said. “Who cares if her dad works for that law firm? Lenny beats them every time they meet in court.”

“Exactly,” Gina said. “We’ll need to tell Lenny about this, too. He’s going to be pissed anyway. Might as well give him all the bad news at once.”

The three of us went to Lenny’s office and walked in. He sat at his desk, staring out the window at the shoppers on the street. The remains of half-a-pack of cigarettes were in his ashtray.

“Well, what have you got?” he said. “Tell me some good news.”

“We found out what’s going on with Amber,” Gina said.

“And we found out from Suzie who we’re actually looking for,” I said.

“Well?”

“Amber first,” Gina said. “Her dad is Thomas Elliot, from Perkins, Elliot, & McMann.”

Lenny looked confused for a second and then it hit him.

“Oh shit,” he said.

“What?” Sophie asked. “What does her dad have to do with anything? We kicked their asses in the Martinez case last year. In fact, we beat them every time they go against us.”

“As long as Amber works here,” Gina said, “we can’t go against her father’s law firm. It would be a conflict of interest, not to mention Amber would learn the details on any active case we have. She’d run to her dad and tell him everything.”

The light came on in Sophie's eyes. "And we can't fire her because then she'd take us to trial on the harassment thing."

"It was a set-up all along," Lenny said. "I'm not sure how I could have been so stupid."

The three of us looked at Lenny. Everybody in the room knew exactly why Amber was able to seduce him. Lenny is an unmarried man who seldom dates and is typically shy around women. When a young and aggressive woman went after him, Lenny had no chance of fighting off her charms.

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Lenny spoke.

"All right, so how are we going to get rid of her, yet keep the firm out of a harassment suit?"

"We know she isn't going to want to do any work," Gina said. "Maybe if we made her actually do something, she'd get mad and quit."

"Yeah, that's good," Lenny said. "Put her to work. She was hired as an admin, let's have her do the admin work. She can do the billing and file the documents that have been piling up since Annie left. I can see her quitting over having to do work. Sophie, be sure to check the billing statements before anything actually goes out. I don't want anything to get screwed up."

Sophie nodded her head. "No problem."

"Now, just to be sure," Lenny said, "Sophie, type up a formal letter of release and resignation. I'll need to look it over first, but then I want everyone to carry one at all times. If she quits, have Amber sign it and get it notarized before her dad can talk her out of it. Okay, what about Mistress McNasty. Who's the client we need to find?"

"His name is Johnny Scarpazzi," I said.

"What does that mean?" Lenny asked. "Do I know him?"

"Um, in addition to being a client of Suzie's, Johnny's the personal driver for Tony DiCenzo."

All the color drained from Lenny's face and I was afraid he was going to pass out. "What?" Lenny said as he lit another cigarette. I noticed his hand was shaking. "You're saying we're back to looking for something for Tough Tony? Shit. Why the hell did you bring this in? Don't you remember what

happened last time we had to find something belonging to DiCenzo? Don't you remember it almost didn't go so well for us?"

"We only found out who he was when we got the download from Suzie," I said.

"Oh, this sucks all around," Lenny said. He looked at Sophie and pointed to the bottle of Jim Beam on the counter across the office. She went over, picked out a glass, and poured in two fingers of bourbon. She gave the glass to Lenny who tossed it back.

We sat quietly while he smoked the rest of the cigarette. We knew Lenny was thinking about how best to handle the problems we'd thrown at him. When he finished the cigarette, he squashed the butt into the ashtray and looked up at us.

"Okay," he said. "This is my fault, too. I should have found out the background on Mistress McNasty's client before I agreed to help find him. Having her in the office was a little, um, distracting, and I wasn't thinking straight on this one."

"Is it too late to back out?" Sophie asked.

"If Tough Tony hears that we had an agreement to help find his man then reneged on it, I could see it going badly for us. Now that we have a signed contract in place, we're going to have to go through with it."

He reached out for another cigarette and lit it. This time his hand was steady. "Shit," he said, "I was hoping never to hear the name Tony DiCenzo again." He looked up at us. "Okay, we're going to have a couple of busy days on this."

Lenny pointed at me. "You've got the DiCenzo thing and the truck company guy. Normally Gina would do the missing person, but Mistress McNasty already trusts you, and you seem to have some sort of weird DiCenzo connection."

I was going to say something, but Lenny held up his hand. "No, I really don't want to know the details about you and Tough Tony."

He then pointed at Gina. "This puts everything else in your lap. We can't neglect the rest of our clients because we're back to hunting for shit for Tony DiCenzo. Help Laura out when you can."

Gina nodded and Lenny went on. “Sophie, do what you can to manage Amber. Keep her busy, but away from anything we’re currently working on. I’m assuming this Amber thing is mainly to prevent us from going against her father’s firm in the future, but they also could be planning something new against us. Make sure she doesn’t sabotage the computers or mess up our records. It would also be a good idea to make sure the computers and servers all have a current backup.”

He looked at us but no one had any questions.

“Okay everybody, go work the problems.”

Chapter Three

Sophie had started a search on Johnny Scarpazzi, but the results weren't expected to be in for a couple of hours. I didn't need to meet with Tony DiCenzo until three o'clock, so I decided to use the time to go to Arizona Transnational and look around.

I went to my desk and called Mike Malloy. I asked if it was a good time to come over and familiarize myself with his company. He said he'd be around and to ask for him when I got there.

I went up to reception to tell Sophie I was leaving. Gina was at Sophie's desk and they were both sorting through paperwork. The door to the street opened and Amber walked in.

As I remembered her from before, she was in her early twenties, average height, and bone thin. She was ghostly pale and had limp dishwater blonde hair, parted in the middle and hanging to her shoulders. She wore very little makeup, except around her eyes, where she had used way too much. She wore a short blue cotton paisley skirt, a pair of gold chain sandals, and a tight white T-shirt with the word *Bong* written in big purple letters across the front. As she walked toward us, we were hit with the smell of an outhouse on a hot day. From the corner of my eye, I saw Sophie gagging a little bit.

Not knowing what to do, I held out my hand. Amber shook it limply.

"Hi, Amber," I said. "Welcome back."

"Um, hi," Amber said. "I'm here to work and stuff, you know?"

"It's okay," Gina said. "We know why you're here. And since you're going to be working here from now on, we might as well show you what you'll be doing."

"Doing?" Amber asked. It was obvious she hadn't thought this far into why she was here.

"Sure," I said. "You were originally hired on to be the new admin and honestly we could use one. The woman we had working in the position left a week ago to go back to school full-time. The billing and filing has started to pile up again."

“What’s an admin?” Amber asked.

We looked at Sophie for the answer, but she had grown pale. Her mouth was hanging open and she was vacantly staring across the office. We could see her stomach muscles clenching and unclenching.

“It’s short for administrative assistant,” Gina said. She reached over, pulled a paper from Sophie’s desk, and handed it to Amber.

Lips moving as she read, Amber carefully studied the document. When that made no sense to her, she slowly read it out loud.

“Provides office services by implementing administrative systems, procedures, and policies, and monitoring administrative projects.” She looked up, confused.

“That means you’re responsible for keeping the office organized and functioning well,” Gina said. “It mainly involves filing and billing.”

“I thought assistant meant I was Leonard’s personal assistant. I would carry his briefcase when he went to court, travel with him, and get him his coffee and stuff.”

“Sorry,” I said. “That’s not what an admin does.”

“Well shit,” Amber said.

“And given the circumstances,” Gina said, “it’s best that you don’t have any contact with Lenny. Don’t talk with him and never go into his office for any reason.”

Aaaack.

We turned and looked at Sophie. She was holding her stomach and making sounds like Marlowe coughing up a hairball.

Aaaaaaack.

“Excuse me,” she said as she got up and quickly walked to the back offices, where the bathrooms were located.

“One other thing,” Gina said. “We need to go over your hours.”

“My hours?”

“You’re expected to be here at eight o’clock in the morning, you have an hour for lunch, and you leave at five.”

“Every day?”

“There’s a time clock in the back and you’ll need to punch in and out.”

“But what happens if I have stuff to do?”

“You’ll accrue half a day of sick time and a day of vacation for every month you work here. You can use those anytime you want. Other than that, if you make a habit of coming in late or leaving early, it can lead to disciplinary actions up to and including discharge for cause.” Gina pulled a stapled document from Sophie’s desk. “Here’s the employee manual. It has all the details.”

Amber took the paperwork and held it loosely. From the look on her face, the thought of working in an office was becoming less appealing by the minute.

“Come on,” Gina said. “I’ll show you your cubicle.”

Gina and Amber went into the back just as Sophie came back into reception. Some color had returned to her face and she looked a little steadier.

“You really don’t like Amber’s perfume,” I said. “I think it’s horrible, but it makes you physically ill.”

“I can’t help it. There’s something about it that makes me queasy. It reminds me of the public changing rooms on the beach in California as a kid. Drunks would pee in them and on hot summer days, they would smell terrible. I had to change clothes in them anyway and a couple of times I actually did throw up. When I smell Amber’s perfume it all comes back to me.”

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Arizona Transnational was located up in the Scottsdale Industrial Airpark, a business and manufacturing district surrounding a small airport in north Scottsdale. The airport itself was built in World War II to train fighter pilots and was now mainly used by corporate jets and the wealthy elite of Scottsdale.

About halfway up Scottsdale Road, I noticed my air-conditioning wasn’t blowing as cold as it normally does. This has happened before, usually in August when the AC has been working constantly for almost four months.

The last time it happened, they tightened everything and recharged the system. It had cost about three hundred dollars. I was silently dreading having to do it again.

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I found Arizona Transnational and drove through a gate in a high chain-link fence. I parked near the office building, which was attached to a large warehouse. I counted fifteen or twenty loading bays and about two dozen semi-trailers parked in the yard, waiting to be loaded or unloaded.

I went into the office and met with Mike Malloy. He gave me a tour of the warehouse and showed me the yard behind the main building where the fires had been set in the pallets and in the dumpster. They'd cleaned up after each fire and there wasn't a lot to see. Both were pretty far from the main building, which was built of fireproof cinderblocks in any case. I didn't think whoever did it was trying to cause any major damage. More like they were sending a message.

Mike introduced me to the warehouse manager, the dock foreman, the shipping clerk, and the office manager. No one had a connection with Southwest Desert Transport.

On the walk back to the office, I told Mike I'd like to talk with the guy who had gotten into a fight with the driver from Southwest Desert Transport and with the new security guard. He said the driver, whose name was Lindsay Mills, was probably out on a run, but the guard would be working the graveyard shift, which started at eleven o'clock. He also said he'd let the guard and the night manager know I'd be in. I tried to sound positive and upbeat but the thought of coming back at eleven didn't fill me with happiness.

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At two thirty, I climbed into my car and began the drive up Scottsdale Road to the resorts. My destination was a big steel maintenance building normally used for repairing golf course landscaping and irrigation equipment.

The first time I'd been there, it had been the location of an exchange of diamonds between the Russian mafia and a group of international crooks called the Consortium. During the meeting, nearly forty million dollars'

worth of diamonds were exchanged between the groups. Unfortunately, the Consortium tried to cheat on paying the full price to the Russians. The result was a gun battle that only ended when the building blew up. The Consortium offered to pay for a new building, at least partially to gloss over the fact that their guys had been the ones who had blown up the old one.

The second time, I met a client there as a way to avoid being followed by some Feds. As it turned out, the client was a bit of a crook himself and was now in a witness relocation program, living in parts unknown.

As I drove north, I noticed my air-conditioning had definitely gone from cold to cool. I mentally thought about what bills I could put off to have a working air conditioner again. When nothing came to mind, I debated whether or not I really needed an air conditioner in the car. Summer would be over in about two months, I reasoned to myself. Plus, the worst of the heat was already over. But even as I thought this, I could feel beads of sweat start to form on my forehead.

I turned off Scottsdale Road well before the resorts. I drove down a couple of side roads, with the last half-mile being a narrow maintenance road. It ended in a dirt parking lot in front of a large red metal building. In the lot sat broken machinery, riding lawnmowers, and carts full of irrigation pipes. I recalled most of these had been here the first time I came to the building, back in January. Several half-dead orange trees helped to give the place an ominous feeling.

I parked in the lot next to a dozen other cars, some nice, some not so nice. I was a little disappointed when I noticed Max's black Mercedes convertible was nowhere to be seen.

A large sliding door in the building was open to reveal a cavernous space where a half-dozen industrial-sized lawnmowers and tractors were in various states of disassembly and repair. I went in and walked over to the office area on the right-hand side.

The last time I was in the building there had been violence and death. This time, a dozen men were casually milling about in the rebuilt office space. I recognized Tony, Milo, and Gabriella. I also recognized one of the goons who was apparently some sort of operations manager. I had seen him around once or twice before, but didn't know his name. He was in his early forties, a little scary looking, and built like a tank.

Tony saw me and walked up to shake my hand. He indicated that I should take a seat off to the side near the front. Both Gabriella and Milo nodded as a way of hello.

As was her custom, Gabriella stood in the corner of the room near the front with her large black bag slung casually over her shoulder. As she watched over the crowd, I pitied any man foolish enough to start trouble with Tony while she was within shooting range. I knew she typically carried an Uzi along with enough ammunition to start a small war. I've often speculated about what other types of military hardware were in the bag.

Tony called the meeting together and everyone found a seat among the chairs which had been set up in three rows. He then gave a brief speech about how glad he was that each of them had decided to work for the organization. It sounded like a speech any business owner would give to a group of new workers, with one exception. Tony mentioned three times that loyalty to the organization was the most important trait of any employee of the company. He wrapped up his talk by saying, "If you're loyal to the organization, you'll do fine. If you aren't, we'll have a problem. And gentlemen, you don't want to end up on my shit list." I expected some nervous laughter at this, but as I looked over the recruits, I could see they were all taking his words seriously.

The man I sort of recognized was introduced as Salvatore Monza, head of internal security. He also gave a speech about the importance of performing your best, no matter how trivial or unimportant the individual job may seem. "In security, we function as a team. The assignment that's the quietest is the most dangerous. If you think you're stationed at a dull security station, you can be assured the bad guys know it, too. That's exactly where they'll strike."

As both Salvatore and Tony were talking, I looked at each man seated in the room, trying to associate them with someone from Carlos the Butcher's drug cartel, the Black Death. Fortunately, no one set off any alarm bells in my head.

As the meeting was about to break up, Tony and Gabriella both glanced in my direction. I shook my head. Tony seemed pleased, but Gabriella looked disappointed, like a five-year-old who'd been told there would be no dessert after dinner.

*Go figure that one.*

The men filed out with a lot of good-natured talking. Tony came over to me with Salvatore Monza in tow.

“Laura Black, this is Sal Monza. As a result of the incident at the wedding, I decided to beef up our security systems a notch. I’ve made Sal head of a new internal security group. He has a good head on his shoulders and reports directly to Max.”

We shook hands as Tony continued.

“Sal, this is Laura Black. She’s an investigator with the law firm of Halftown, Oeding, Shapiro, & Hopkins here in Scottsdale. It’s run by Lenny Shapiro. He’s alright, for a lawyer. They’ve done some work for our group in the past. In addition, Laura has helped me out a few times and I consider her to be a personal friend.”

I saw Sal look me up and down, as if making a mental image for his internal filing system. Tony had marked me as one of the good guys and Sal was making sure not to forget my face.

“Thank you for your service today,” Tony said to me. “If you’re still willing, I might need you again sometime in the future. It’s been a great help having your assistance in this matter.”

“No problem,” I said. “I hope you remember I don’t know everyone associated with Carlos. I’m not fool-proof.”

“That’s understood. I think of you as simply one more background check.”

“Tony, before I go, there’s something I wanted to discuss with you.”

“Of course,” Tony said. “Sal, would you excuse us.”

Sal walked over to a group of men and they began to talk. Gabriella took up her usual position overlooking the entire room. I briefly wondered what thoughts she had about coming back to the room where she almost died six months before.

“Yes, Laura Black,” Tony said. “What can I do for you today?”

“Tony, I noticed that Johnny Scarpazzi isn’t here today.”

Tony's face tightened. I've seen the same look on Reno's face when he's questioning a suspect, his cop-face. Since Tony now had on his version of the cop-face, I knew I'd struck a nerve.

"No," Tony said evenly. "Johnny's not here today."

"Tony, we've always been honest with each other. I heard yesterday afternoon that somebody named John was missing. I found out this morning that it was Johnny Scarpazzi."

Tony gave me a look that was sort of hard to read.

"Laura Black, you continue to surprise me. Yes, I'll confirm what you already seem to know. Johnny didn't come in today. In the thirty years I've known him, this is the first time he hasn't shown up without a good reason communicated in advance. I have inquiries out, but so far, I've heard nothing. You seem to know more about it than my own guys. What can you tell me about his disappearance?"

"I'll tell you what I know, but first help me put his personal life into context. I really don't know anything about him, other than that he works for you as a bodyguard and a driver."

"Since I can see you are asking both as a personal friend as well as a trained investigator, I'll be open with you. Johnny and I go way back. He came out with me from New York in the eighties. We both worked for the same family out there. After we came out to Arizona, we've continued to work closely. He's a trusted advisor and a friend."

"So, he has no issues with working here? No beef against anyone? From what I hear, Johnny used to be both your personal bodyguard and your driver, now he's only your driver. Is he okay with that?"

"Johnny's both bright and loyal. Over the past two years, Gabriella's taken over most of my personal security duties. Johnny's position has evolved to that of my primary driver and he seems content with that. For my part, I'm glad. It's given us a chance to have many long discussions about both the organization and life in general."

*I wonder if he really is content. Being replaced sounds like a demotion to me.*

"I've made him a millionaire several times over and he's proved he'll take a bullet for me." Tony saw my questioning look and held up his hand.

“A story for another time perhaps. Let me tell you the short version, I have no worries about the fidelity of Johnny Scarpazzi.”

“Was there any specific threat made against him? Do you know of anyone out to get even with him about something?”

“As far as I know, he was not a specific target. Of course, every one of us lives under a shadow of uncertainty, to one extent or another. As the business has progressed through the years, I’ve taken steps to minimize exposure of my people to that aspect of the job, but it does still exist.”

“He strikes me as a quiet man, in general. Away from here, what’s he like?”

“Johnny’s life is pretty much wrapped around the business. He has a house on the north side of Camelback Mountain. It’s nice and well kept, but somewhat modest when you consider the houses that surround it. He drives a black Mercedes sedan. He bought it fifteen years ago and he keeps it looking showroom new. He seldom takes vacations, but when he does, it’s usually to Europe. He prefers Rome, Florence, and Paris.”

“What do you know about his personal life?”

“I purposely keep a distance from what my guys do on their off-hours. But I do happen to know Johnny’s routine. He works six days a week, again by his choice. He always takes Mondays off, unless something special is happening. I know he has a girlfriend who he sees on Mondays and I know he often goes to Sedona to visit a psychic.”

“A psychic seems a bit odd.”

“Like I said, I don’t interfere with the private lives of my guys. As long as they’re loyal to the organization, they can pretty much do as they like. My only restriction is they can’t do anything illegal or that would raise the suspicions of the authorities. I can’t have my guys getting caught doing something amateurish or stupid. Now then, Laura Black, it’s your turn. How did you find out about his disappearance and what do you know?”

*Shit, what do I say about Mistress McNasty?*

“I found out from his girlfriend, um, Suzie. She lives in my apartment building and knows I work at a law firm. She has no idea what Johnny does for a living other than that he works at a company that manages golf resorts. When Johnny missed their, um, date yesterday morning, she knew

something was wrong. She wanted to call in his disappearance to the police, but thought they would take it more seriously if Lenny reported it. She also hired us this morning to help look for him in conjunction with the police. I've just started digging and so far have nothing."

Tony looked at me for a moment while he processed the information.

"Thank you for telling me what you know. It's unfortunate that she's involved the police, but from her perspective, she's doing the correct thing. Let's be in constant communications on this. Go through Max, he's leading the efforts to track him down. That's why he isn't with us today."

*Max? Working closely with Max is probably not a good idea.*

"Sure, Tony, will do."

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I got in my car and began driving back home. It was only six thirty, which gave me about five hours until I had to be back at Arizona Transnational. I stopped at Filiberto's Mexican Restaurant on Indian Bend and got a carne asada burrito. I also splurged a bit and got a tall glass of *horchata*, the creamy cinnamon-vanilla drink you can only get at the more traditional Mexican restaurants.

As I was munching my dinner, I thought I might as well get it over with and called Max. My heart sped up a notch as I rang his cell. When he answered, I told him I knew about Johnny being missing and I'd already talked to Tony about it. I also told him I thought the first obvious place to look would be his house.

"I should have guessed you'd already know about it," Max said. "I sent two guys over there first thing. They did a top to bottom search, but there was no sign of Johnny. They also reported that nothing looked out of place. I'm on my way to the house to look through it myself. If you're available, I could use an extra set of eyes."

Alone in a house with Max? Not a good idea.

"Sure, what's the address?"

Max gave me the address for a house on East Solano Drive, up on the north side of Camelback Mountain in Paradise Valley. Definitely in the nice part of town. I told him I would meet him there in about twenty minutes.

I hopped in the car and headed west towards Camelback Mountain. Along the way, I called Suzie.

“Do you know anything about John going to a psychic?”

“Sure, I was the one who recommended Beatrix to him. She’s my cousin and lives outside of Sedona in Oak Creek Canyon. She works as a psychic at one of the institutes there. She’s good at what she does and has been doing it for years.”

“Really? I didn’t know you could make a living as a psychic.”

“Sure. The institute’s a great place with a shop that sells crystals and incense. She does surprisingly well with it. Her institute is supposed to be near one of the energy vortexes. John usually goes up to Sedona after our Monday morning sessions. He says I help him clear his mind and Beatrix helps him clear his soul. When I talked to her, she said John missed his appointment with her as well.”

“We should tell the police about your cousin. It might help them in their investigation. Although honestly, if you say the word psychic to a cop, he’ll most likely roll his eyes, then totally forget you said it.”

“I get that feeling, too,” Suzie said. “It was one of the reasons I wanted to go through a lawyer rather than simply call it in.”

“When would you have time to go up to Sedona? I’d like to talk with her and see what she knows.”

“Leonard and I have an interview with a detective tomorrow morning at nine,” Suzie said. “He said it should only take about two hours and I’m good any time after that. I’ve already let the school and my boys know something’s going on and I may need to be gone on short notice. I’ve already canceled everything for tomorrow.”

“Perfect. I also need to do a couple of things first. I’ll meet you at the office after you talk to the police.”

“I’ll call my cousin and let her know we’ll be up after lunch.”

When I hung up with Suzie, I noticed that the air conditioner was still blowing out air that was only cool, maybe even a little warmer than before. I fiddled with the knobs, but cool was the best it would do.

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I drove down Scottsdale Road to McDonald Drive then headed west to East 54<sup>th</sup> Street. As I wound my way up the north side of Camelback Mountain, I couldn't help but be impressed at the size of the houses. If I ever won the lottery, Camelback Mountain would be a good place to start looking for my next house.

I pulled into a driveway through a gap in a high row of pink flowering oleander. As Tony had described, the house was beautiful, but smaller than most of the others on Camelback Mountain. The location had a great view north toward Paradise Valley. I could imagine some developer demolishing the house to put a high-dollar mega-mansion on the property. An older black Mercedes sedan was parked near the front door and Max's black convertible was parked next to it. Max was nowhere to be seen.

I parked and went up to the house. Telling myself no one but Max was inside, I opened the door and walked in. The interior of the house was as beautiful as the outside. I hadn't been sure what to expect, but the interior of the house reminded me of some of the Italian villas I've seen on the Travel Channel. It was beautifully decorated and spotless.

*I guess gangsters like a clean house. I wonder if Max has a clean house.*

I heard a noise in the back and called out, "Hello."

"I'm back here," Max's deep and steady voice called out.

I found Max in an office looking through the items sitting on the desk. Instead of smiling when he saw me, he looked tired and grim.

"Have you found anything yet?" I asked.

"No, and honestly I don't really know what I'm looking for. It's not like he left a note that says he's spending a few days at the beach." He stopped and looked at me.

"Sorry," he said. "I know I sound cranky. With everything that's been going on, I've got a bad feeling about Johnny disappearing. I hate feeling like a helpless bystander."

"When we search for someone at the law firm, we always start with the financials. You can get a pretty good idea of a person's habits and locations if you track where the money comes from and where it goes. Plus, if he uses a credit card, you can be notified of his location right away."

“You’re the second person who’s told me that today. We’ve hired an outside firm to help us look through both his financials and phone records. They’re monitoring his credit cards and his cell. If he makes a purchase or a phone call anywhere in the world, I’ll be notified immediately. Not only will we have his location, but we’ll also know he’s still alive. Well, assuming Johnny’s the one using the phone or the card.”

“I assume that black sedan out front is his?”

“It’s the same car he’s had for years. Knowing Johnny disappeared without taking his car is unsettling, but I don’t think he was taken by force. Knowing Johnny, there would have been a lot of property damage before anyone could have subdued him. I’ve looked around and nothing seems to be out of place. So, I hear you’re on the case?”

“Johnny’s girlfriend Suzie hired Lenny to notify the police and we’re helping to track him down. I don’t know if I can do anything the police or your outside firm can’t do, but I’ll try to help.”

“I just got off the phone with Tony and he mentioned that. At first, I thought involving the police was a bad move, but after thinking about it, I’d frankly welcome their assistance if it helps get Johnny back. We’ll just need to be careful how we handle them if they come asking questions.”

“We’ve already started a computer search on our end,” I said. “I’ve noticed it’s sometimes helpful if we feed the search program some solid bits of information in addition to the person’s name. It helps point it in the right direction. Like giving a bloodhound some clothing to sniff. Would you mind if we went through Johnny’s desk and grabbed some of his bank and credit card statements? Maybe a brokerage statement if he has an account?”

“That sounds like a good idea. However, after you make copies, return the documents to me and I’ll refile them. I know we’re doing this for the right reasons, but I want to minimize how intrusive we are into Johnny’s personal life.”

“Speaking of personal life,” I said. “The other obvious place to learn about someone is in the bedroom. Looking through his drawers may tell us a lot of information.”

“I was thinking the same thing. I’ve already done a quick walk through the house already. I’ll show you where the bedroom is.”

“If you’d rather not know too much,” I said, “I could look through his personal things and tell you what’s relevant.”

“No, let’s do this together. Hopefully we can find something useful.”

Max led me to the master bedroom. Like the rest of the house, it was beautiful and stylish. A large four-poster bed dominated the space along with a matching armoire and nightstand. A broad archway led to the en suite bathroom and a large walk-in closet.

We went into the closet and didn’t see anything unusual. The racks were full of clothing. Most of it was nice but not necessarily new. Same for the shoes; all of them were high quality, but only one pair looked as though it had been recently purchased. Towards the back of the closet was a blank space about four feet along the wall between the shelves. This set off a chorus of angels singing in my head.

“This is sort of too obvious,” I said, “but let me try something.”

I went to the wall and pushed on the right edge. It gave slightly, there was a soft click, and then the wall popped open an inch. I pulled on the wall, which was now a door, and it easily swung open.

We both sucked in some air.

“Well,” Max said. “Johnny always did like to be prepared.”

Inside the door were three full racks of weapons, ranging from pistols to shotguns to military assault weapons. Max picked up one of the assault rifles and ejected the clip. After checking the clip was full, he pushed it back in and replaced the rifle in the rack.

“Johnny was ready for a siege. They must have come at him another way.”

“Let’s see what else we can find.”

Max started going through the drawers in the walk-in and I started on the nightstand. The top drawer contained a Smith & Wesson .38 semi-automatic pistol in a nylon shoulder holster and a dozen paperback books, mostly westerns and war adventures. When I opened the second drawer, things got more interesting. Here was a neatly organized selection of leather cuffs, ropes, blindfolds, ball-gags, paddles, slappers, and floggers.

I picked up one of the leather ass-slappers and turned it over in my hand. The word *STUD* was stamped into it using raised metal knobs. The letters in the word were reversed, like in a mirror. The effect would be to have the word transferred onto the ass of whomever was smacked with it.

Looking down at the ropes and manacles, I could suddenly envision being tied spread-eagle to the big four-poster bed, naked and helpless; blindfolded and unable to escape while Max stood over me, ready to perform whatever twisted sexual acts he desired. My body would be completely open and vulnerable to him. I would be unable to resist, no matter how he wanted to use me to satisfy his lustful needs.

*Oh my.*

My heart rate climbed as my imagination kicked in to overdrive. With the blindfold, I wouldn't be able to see what Max was about to do to me. Where would he touch me first? Would it be pleasure or pain? Would it be a soft kiss on my lips or would it be a slap with a piece of leather against something a little more sensitive? My thoughts started to drift as I rapidly played out a few scenarios in my mind.

I heard a deep voice speaking softly into my ear. "I see how you're looking at the bondage equipment. Interesting. Maybe I've been taking the wrong approach. Maybe I should tie you to a bed first and go from there."

Without thinking, I turned and kissed him. This wasn't the polite and good-natured kisses we'd been sharing over the last several months. This was more of a lustful attack. I grabbed his head and pulled it toward me as I crushed my body against his. As he started kissing me back, I walked him backwards until he was against the side of the bed, then I pushed him back onto it.

I briefly stood back and looked down as Max moved to the center of the bed. Without thinking, I quickly climbed on the bed and straddled him. My hair brushed against his face as I bent over to attack him with another deep kiss. My hands held his face as he wrapped his arms around my waist. I could feel his body respond as my thighs tightly gripped his legs. All thoughts of who was a criminal and who was a boyfriend faded into the background as I started to press myself against him.

I kissed him harder and deeper, becoming lost in the sensation. My mind drove out all thoughts except for my need to be with this man. I wanted to

be under the sheets and feel him surrounding me. I wanted him to have me, over and over. I wanted to use him until we were both sweaty and exhausted.

I reached up and pulled the bedspread down to reveal the clean sheets underneath. But even as I did, I started thinking about where we were and why we were here. I gradually stopped kissing Max and sat up.

“Don’t stop,” he said. I could hear his breath coming in gulps of air.

A feeling close to panic started to set in. “We shouldn’t be doing this here. It isn’t right.”

“Of course it’s the right thing to do.” He looked closer at me. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t.” I knew my face was red from embarrassment and I suddenly felt like crying. “It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have started this. At least not here.”

“It’s okay. I know Johnny would approve.”

“Oh, it’s not only that. I want the first time to be right. Not a quickie while we’re searching the house of a missing man. I mean, what if the worst happens with Johnny? I don’t want the two memories to be intertwined.”

I rolled off Max and lay next to him on the bed. I halfway expected him to protest, but instead he put an arm around me and held me close. I could still feel his heart pounding and his body reacting to what had almost happened.

“I’m really sorry,” I said. “That was wrong in so many ways. I don’t know what came over me. When I’m next to you I seriously don’t think straight.”

“I wasn’t complaining. However, I should probably tell you something. Gentleman or not, the next time you kiss me like that, we’re not stopping. Understand? Even if I have to use the bondage equipment to tie you to the bed, I’m having you.”

*Great, another fantasy about Max I’ll have stuck in my head.*

I answered by kissing him softly on the cheek and hugging him tightly. We lay like that for almost ten minutes.

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We spent the next two hours going room to room. We opened drawers and searched closets. We went through file cabinets and searched for more hidden panels. We didn't find anything to point us in the right direction. However, whenever we ran into each other as we crisscrossed through the house, Max and I would take the opportunity to spend a minute or two sharing kisses and holding each other closely. After a while, I didn't even need that for an excuse, I would simply walk up to him and wrap my arms around his body. I made sure not to let it get past the fun and lighthearted stage. I knew Max was serious and the next time my kisses became passionate I'd find myself in bed, naked and maybe even tied-up.

I'll probably go to hell for this.

By ten forty-five, we had looked everywhere there was to look. By mutual consent, we decided to call it a night.

"This has been the strangest day," Max said as we walked out of the house to the driveway, his arm around my waist.

"We need to dig deeper," I said. "So far there's nothing to show why Johnny disappeared."

"You're right. There isn't anything obvious. All we've learned is that he has a small arsenal in his closet and he enjoys tying up and paddling his lady friends."

Well, it's not exactly the lady friends who like to be tied up and spanked.

Max told me to call him with any news and he promised to do the same. We spent a few minutes kissing, then we both got into our cars and drove away.

Chapter Four

At eleven fifteen, I made it back to Arizona Transnational at the Scottsdale Airpark. Mike Malone said he'd alerted both the security guard and the night manager, a man named Red Norgard, that I'd be there to look around.

When I parked my car, there was a uniformed security officer, maybe twenty years old, reading a college biology textbook in the guard shack. His name badge said "Manuel". I introduced myself and asked him what was going on.

"It's quiet," he said. "Actually, except for the guy starting the fires, it's always quiet. I've worked here for two weeks and you're the first outside visitor I've had." He pointed to a color monitor. "They've installed seven cameras around the facility. Everything gets fed into this computer where it's recorded."

I gave him my card and asked him to give me a call if anything happened while I was inside. He said he would.

I went inside and found Red Norgard. He showed me around and introduced me to everyone. I spent the next two hours talking individually to the dozen people who made up the graveyard shift. Most of the employees were men, but there were also two women.

No one had any idea who was setting the fires or who might have a grudge with the company. With each person, I looked for a connection with Southwest Desert Transport. Only two had any connection at all.

The first was a woman named Jessie Santos. She'd previously dated a guy who drove a truck for Southwest. The second was a man named Darryl Watkins who had briefly worked for Southwest Desert when it first opened, about a year ago.

The person I most wanted to talk with was the guy who had gotten into a fight with the driver from Southwest Desert approximately three weeks earlier. Mike Malloy said his name was Lindsay Mills and he also drove a truck. Unfortunately, I found out Lindsay was delivering a load to Edmonton, Canada and wouldn't be back for two days.

When I talked to Darryl, he was going on a break, so I met with him in the company lunchroom. He was in his mid-fifties and had the look of a man who was comfortable at his job.

“Why’d you quit working for Southwest Desert after only a month?” I asked.

“It wasn’t so much that I quit as I was fired,” he said. “They said I had an attitude and I guess I did. I’ve been in trucking and transportation for over thirty years. I know how things work. Those bozos were setting up a new shop and had no idea what they were doing. Total amateurs. When I pointed out how to do some of the basic things correctly, they became annoyed. After a month, I was fired. I got a job here and things have been working out pretty well. Some of the managers here are pricks, but the company mostly knows how to do things right.”

“While you were there, did you notice anything unusual about the company or the people working there?”

“Well, I would swear half the guys there never worked in transportation before. They all had egos and tempers but without the skills to back them up. Like I said, they were amateurs, guys who thought they could start a new location and things would automatically go smoothly because they dictated they should. The place can burn for all I care.”

I then talked to Jessie Santos. I found her behind her desk in the shipping office. She worked as the night shipping clerk and had been with the company for a little over three years. She was in her mid-twenties and was pretty. She was dressed in a surprisingly nice outfit, considering when and where she was working. When I asked her about Southwest Desert, she said she’d dated a driver who worked there. As we talked, I got the impression she was the kind of person who was always in a good mood.

“It wasn’t a big thing. His name’s Lew Lockridge. We went out five or six times a few months ago. He was hot in bed, but other than that, we really didn’t get along. I’m hoping to find a guy who’s trying to better himself and to move ahead in the world. Of course, I’m now dating a guy who works here, so maybe it’s my fate to marry a trucker.”

“Does Lew still work at Southwest Desert?”

“I don’t know, but I doubt it. They’ve probably fired him by now. He did have a temper.”

On the way out to my car, I stopped by the guard shack where Manuel had moved from biology to chemistry. He said the night had been quiet. I asked him to give me a call if anything came up over the next few nights. Once again, he said he would.

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At one forty-five, I unlocked my door and stumbled into my apartment. Marlowe was nowhere to be seen, so I knew he was sleeping with Grandma Peckham. I was too tired to even to brush my teeth. Instead, I slipped on a big T-shirt, set the alarm for six thirty, and collapsed onto the bed. I didn’t have time to fantasize about either Reno or Max before I was asleep.

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The alarm sounded bright and cheery as it pulled me out of a sound sleep. I hit the snooze four times, but at last I made myself get up. I put on a pot of coffee and downed two cups before I poured the rest into *The Big Pig*, my giant-sized travel mug.

At eight fifteen, I drove down Scottsdale Road and turned east onto Curry Road. As I drove, I noticed the air conditioner had started blowing out air that was now sort of on the warm side. I fiddled with the knobs long enough to decide it was close to being dead. Wanting to save what little I had left, I turned it off and opened the windows. Fortunately, it wasn’t hot enough yet to be more than mildly uncomfortable.

The area south of Curry down to the Salt River is set aside for light industrial and warehousing. Southwest Desert Transport was located on the eastern edge of this district. I wasn’t expecting to learn a lot, but I needed to get a look at the place and see what I could pick up from the outside.

I parked a block and a half away on one of the unnamed side streets. I walked past several nondescript businesses, mostly consisting of cinderblock buildings surrounded by cracked concrete parking lots and high chain-link fences.

Southwest Desert Transport was located in a building that had obviously been there for many years. Since they were a relatively new company to

Scottsdale, they must have bought the property from someone else who had either gone bust or moved on.

I walked to the back of the property to see if I could spot anything unusual. I almost never see anything obvious when I walk around a business, but I always like to have a more or less complete mental image of the companies I investigate. It helps keep me from getting lost if I need to poke around later in the dark.

The view from the back showed the typical high chain-link fence surrounding a four or five acre lot and a large warehouse building with a dozen loading bays. Similar to Arizona Transnational, fifteen or twenty semi-trailers were parked in the lot, waiting to be loaded or unloaded. I looked at it for another five minutes, but I didn't see anything out of place. Truth be told, it looked like any other business in this part of town.

I then walked around to the front where there was a large sliding gate, which didn't look like it had ever been closed. Next to the gate was a guard shack that also looked abandoned. The parking lot near the office end of the warehouse building had about fifteen cars in an area that could have held forty or fifty.

I looked into the guard shack through the dusty window. I wanted to see if there was a uniform, a computer, or maybe a coffee cup. Anything that showed it was manned during the off-hours. If not, I'd come back after dark and continue my snooping.

I didn't see a computer, but there was a clipboard on the desk holding a thick stack of papers. I pressed my face against the glass to see if I could read a date. If I could spot one and it was old, it would confirm they didn't have a night guard. Unfortunately, no matter how I twisted my head, I couldn't read a date anywhere. Frustrated, I turned to go and ran into a woman who was standing directly behind me.

I cried out, mostly from fright and embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I didn't know you were behind me."

"That's alright," she said. "I didn't mean to scare you. I guess I didn't make enough noise. I was looking out my window and saw what you were doing out here."

"You did?"

“It’s okay,” she said. “I see it all the time. People get to the guard shack and when there’s no security guard, they don’t know if they should wait for someone to show up or if they should just walk over to the office. I came out to tell you it’s okay to go ahead and walk in.”

“Um, thanks,” I said.

“You are here for the job? Aren’t you?”

Job? Damn. This isn’t good.

“Um, yes,” I said.

“Okay, good. Follow me.” The woman turned and walked toward the office building. I followed a few steps behind. She was about my age and height. She was slim to the point of being skinny and when she spoke, there was a strong Spanish accent. She smiled constantly and her eyes were vivid and expressive, as if she saw the entire world with a trace of irony. She didn’t have on a wedding ring, but was wearing a gold necklace and several bangle bracelets.

When we reached the door of the office building, she turned and held out her hand. “Oh, by the way, I’m Danielle, Danielle Ortega.”

I shook her hand. “I’m Laura, um, Laura Brown.”

She again flashed her ironic smile. “Laura Brown, I’m glad you came. We put the ad up two weeks ago and no one else has responded. You’ll be part of the office staff. And by office staff, I mean the two ladies who are both past retirement age and me. The company is a big multi-national, but what we do here is mainly the local billing and scheduling. It’s not hard, but it does get a little boring. Mr. Williams is the site manager and he does all the hiring and firing. But don’t worry. He’ll do whatever I say, at least when it comes to the office staff.”

We walked into the dingy office area where a dozen desks were surrounded by low cubicle walls. It wasn’t that the office was dirty, but everything was old and worn out looking. Most of the desks looked as though no one ever sat at them. Danielle led me to a battered desk with a computer and handed me a sheet of paper with a list of shipments per month and her business card.

“Here’s a basic office skills test,” she said. “Take this list, use a spreadsheet to make a graph of our shipments per month, and then put the

graph in a simple business letter. Attach the letter in an email and send it to me. If you can do that, you've got the job."

Danielle went to her desk and started working while I looked at the list in my hands. How do I get myself in these situations?

Well, I might as well make the most of it.

I used the spreadsheet program to make a graph out of the numbers and dates. I then used the word processor to type up a business letter and inserted the graph. I opened the mail program and sent the letter to the email address on Danielle's business card.

Across the room, I heard Danielle's computer softly ding indicating new mail. A few seconds later, Danielle squealed with happiness and fist pumped the air. She got up and pulled up a chair next to my desk.

"Wow," she said. "That was really fast. I was expecting you to take at least an hour to do that. When can you start? Like the ad said, it's only part-time to start, but I would expect it to switch to full-time in a couple of months." She looked around the office then bent closer and lowered her voice. "I hope you take the job; it would be nice to have someone my age to talk to."

This is probably a really bad idea.

"Sure, I'll take it. I can start tomorrow or maybe the next day. Can I call you?"

"No problem. Mr. Williams is out this week. When he comes back, you'll have to fill out the paperwork. But don't worry. I'll make sure you get paid even though you won't be official until sometime next week."

Well, if Lenny fires me, at least I'll have a backup job.

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I drove to the law office and went in through the rear security door. I then went up front where Sophie was shopping for shoes on the internet.

"Hi, chica," I said.

"Hey, you," Sophie said, pointing to her computer screen. "I read on Facebook that Elizabeth sold her house in Chicago. Hopefully it won't be too long until she comes back to live in Arizona full time."

“That would be great. It’s only been a couple of months, but I really miss her. Is she still seeing that guy?”

“Yup. His name is Jeremy and she posted pictures of them in downtown Chicago. They were at a bar at the top of the John Hancock Center.”

I took a sniff of the office. “I don’t smell Amber. Is she in today?”

“I sent her to Sun City West to pick up some documents. I told her to bring them back tomorrow.”

“Don’t we normally have a courier service bring those over?”

Sophie looked at me as if I was an idiot.

“Oh yeah, right,” I said.

“Oh,” Sophie said. “I got a call from Jackie. It’s Elle’s birthday on Saturday and Jackie wanted me to make sure you knew about it. Apparently, Elle wants to keep it low-key, but the girls are going to do something special for her anyway. Not a formal party with presents, but still something nicer than bar hopping all night. It’s starting at the Saguaro Sky at eight. Gina already said she’d go and Annie will be there. You need to come, too. It’s been weeks since we’ve all been out with the girls.”

“A party sounds like fun. Sure, send back my RSVP, too. I’ll be there, well, you know, unless something comes up.”

“What? Like you being kidnapped again, or you being handcuffed to a bed again, or maybe you getting locked in the trunk of your car again?”

“Well, yeah. Something along those lines.”

Sophie stopped looking at her computer and instead looked closer at me. “Wait a minute. You’re sounding guilty about something. Why do you sound so guilty today?”

“I don’t sound guilty and I don’t know what you’re talking about.” As I said it, I felt my face grow warm.

*How does she always know?*

“Yes you do. Now you have that look again and you’re blushing. You were with Max last night, weren’t you?”

*Shit, what do I say?*

“Well, yes,” I said. “We searched Johnny’s house together. In fact, I have some of his bank statements and brokerage paperwork. We’ll need to make copies and feed the information into the secret search program.”

I dug the papers out of my purse and handed them to Sophie.

“And?”

“And what?”

“And what happened?”

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. You and Max. Have you been a bad girl? Spill it.”

“Fine. Everything was going okay until we went to search Johnny’s bedroom. I found a drawer full of sex toys. Hard-core Mistress McNasty-type bondage equipment. My imagination starting running a little wild. Then, um, well...”

“Oh my God. Did you and Max finally go through with it? In Johnny Scarpazzi’s bedroom?”

“No. Well, almost.”

“What? Did Max try to pressure you? That doesn’t seem like his style.”

“No, that’s the bad part. He was behaving. I was the one who attacked him. It was like I had no control. My hormones sort of took over. I decided I needed him and reason went out the window. If he hadn’t been so decent about it, we would’ve have had a randy sex romp all over Johnny Scarpazzi’s king-size bed.”

“So? That doesn’t sound so bad to me.”

“Sophie!”

“What? I don’t see how that would be a problem. I know how much you want Max. I’m just sayin’. You’d better get on that man before he goes and finds another woman who *is* willing. I’m sorta surprised he’s still waiting around for you. Guys like that don’t stay on the market for long. I’m sure there’re other women who’ve already noticed what a hottie he is. What about the scary-looking brunette in the black leather jumpsuit that day with the diamonds? She was giving him the eye.”

“That was Gabriella. She’s Tony’s bodyguard and she was giving everyone the eye.”

*Was Gabriella giving Max the eye?*

“Besides,” I said, “aren’t you forgetting Max is a criminal? Most women would run the other way.”

“Ha, most women would jump on that and enjoy the ride. I didn’t say you had to marry the man. You’re over-thinking things again.”

I sighed. Maybe I was over-thinking it. I pulled out some notes I had taken after my visit to Arizona Transnational the night before.

“I have a few names I need to check on. There’s Jessie Santos, Darryl Watkins, and Lindsay Mills. While we’re doing it, we should include Mike Malloy and Red Norgard. He’s the night manager.”

“Do they need a deep dive?”

“Not yet. I’m still trying to sort out who’s who over there. What are you doing this afternoon? Is anything going on here?”

“Not a thing. It’s dead in the office today. Lenny’s going to be out the rest of the day and once I type your names in, I’m caught up with my stuff. Amber will be out for the rest of the day, so I don’t have to deal with her. What are *you* doing today?”

“Suzie should be here soon. We’re going up to Sedona to talk with her cousin. She’s a psychic at one of the institutes there. I’m hoping she has some information about Johnny.”

“You’re resorting to a psychic? Isn’t it a little soon for that?”

“No. Johnny sees her every week. I’m hoping he’s told her what’s going on.”

“Well, it should be nice up there. I love Sedona.”

“Why don’t you come along? Forward the office phone to your cell and bring along your tablet so you can answer emails.”

“I love that idea. I could really use an afternoon away from here. It’d be the first road trip we’ve had together since we went down to Rocky Point with Annie. That was months ago. Besides, it would be great to get out of this effen heat for a few hours.”

We heard the front door open and then Suzie walked in.

“Hello, ladies,” she said. “I called Cousin Beatrix and she’ll be in all afternoon.”

“I’m ready to go,” I said. “Would you mind if Sophie comes with us? She often spots connections I miss.”

“Not a problem,” Suzie said. “It’ll be great to have the extra company.”

“Will we have room to fit in your car?” Sophie asked.

“Sorry, I brought the Jaguar.”

“Two-seater or four?” I asked.

Suzie looked at me as if I’d said something ridiculous.

“Well, you don’t want to go in mine,” Sophie said. “Going up with three of us in a VW convertible wouldn’t do anybody any good.”

“Okay,” I said, “we’ll take mine. The AC is starting to go, but it will be cooler once we get up into the mountains.”

We went out the back and got into my car. Suzie took shotgun and Sophie climbed into the back. Curious, I drove around to the front of the law office. Parked three spaces down from the office door was a red Jaguar convertible. As we drove by, I read the license plate: *NASTY1*.

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The drive up Interstate 17 to the Sedona turnoff was uneventful if somewhat warm. My air conditioner kind of worked for about a half an hour, then seemed to fail completely. We opened the windows and everyone put their hair in a ponytail to keep some of the tangles out.

Halfway up, we took a break at the Sunset Point scenic overlook. When I walked out of the bathroom, Sophie was standing next to a sign warning of rattlesnakes and scorpions in the area. She scowled and flexed her arms in a bodybuilder’s pose while Suzie laughed and snapped pictures with her phone.

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I’ve been to Sedona several times before and have always enjoyed the area. It’s a mountain town of about ten thousand people set between thousand-foot-high cliffs in the lushly forested Oak Creek Canyon.

Sedona's main attraction is the array of red sandstone mountains. These massive rock formations appear to glow in brilliant oranges and reds when lit by the rising or setting sun.

Dozens of classic western movies including *Stagecoach*, *Angel and the Badman*, and *The Comancheros* were shot in Sedona, not only for the beauty of the red sandstone, but also for the Western feel of the area. Whenever I'm in Sedona, I halfway expect John Wayne to come charging down the canyon, leading a regiment of Army cavalry.

The other notable thing about Sedona is that many people believe the area is surrounded by vortexes, areas where healing and psychic energy swirl up from the earth. This makes Sedona a spiritual and metaphysical destination for a lot of people. I'm not a big believer in things like UFO's or Bigfoot, so I never took the vortex theory seriously.

Sophie hadn't been to Sedona for a couple of years and her face was halfway out the window as the first of the massive red sandstone formations came into view. We stopped at the scenic overlook at the Red Rock Ranger Station and spent fifteen minutes taking pictures of each other in front of the mountain-sized towers of colorful rock. The cooler temperatures of the mountains made our road trip seem even nicer.

Ten minutes later, we'd made it to central Sedona. I pulled into the parking lot for the Institute for New Age Enlightenment, a large purple and yellow building sitting on the banks of Oak Creek. Signs on the front of the building advertised psychic readings, vortex information, aura photos, and healing massage services.

As we walked in, we were enveloped by the smell of incense and the music of Enya. We asked for Beatrix and the woman at the counter said she was giving a psychic reading and it would be a few minutes.

To pass the time, we wandered through the half-dozen retail rooms of the institute. Some had shelves full of colorful stones and sparkling crystals while others were filled with spiritual books and religious figurines. In the central display cases was a great collection of Southwestern and Native American jewelry.

Toward the back were the private rooms for healing massages and psychic readings. Walking out of one of these was a woman who could have

been Suzie's twin, with the exception that she looked about five years younger.

"Cousin Suzie," the woman said as she spread her arms wide.

"Cousin Beatrix," Suzie said as they both hugged.

Suzie introduced Sophie and me to Beatrix. She had on a lot of jewelry, most of it with either a sun or a moon theme.

"I'm glad you called about Johnny," Beatrix said. "I was concerned when he didn't show up on Monday. It's not like him to miss an appointment. Let's go somewhere where we can sit and talk."

Beatrix led us through the rooms and out to a private garden in back of the institute. A thick green hedge of juniper trees and colorful mountain wildflowers enclosed the space and shut it off from the outside world. Oak Creek was a short distance away, splashing noisily as it rushed past the Institute. Off to one side, a younger woman was at a table with several tarot cards lined up in front of her. She was quietly talking to an older woman while she slowly turned over the cards.

We went to a shady corner where a table and several comfortable chairs were set up. The landscaping and sound of the creek made it a tranquil and peaceful place. I could see why a stressed-out person would pay to sit here for an hour and relax while talking to Beatrix.

"Are you really a psychic?" Sophie asked. "If I was a psychic, I'd pick some winning lottery numbers and move to Kona."

"It's not like I can read minds or anything," Beatrix said. "What I do is more along the lines of counseling and spiritual healing. People sometimes have trouble with work or romance. Maybe they need to make a financial or family decision. I help them focus on what's important. I have several clients with weekly appointments, some of whom I've had for upwards of ten years."

"Tell me about Johnny," I said. "What concerns has he had lately? What has he talked about that could help us locate him?"

"The last several weeks Johnny and I have been talking about doing something major. A big decision was coming up. Something to do with his career."

“What was he deciding? Did he say anything specific?”

“No, it was always general. Actually, I don’t even know what he does for a living other than he’s in some sort of real estate management position. He’s always having meetings at the resorts in Scottsdale. From the way he talked, it sounded like he was thinking about going to work for another company.”

*What? That makes no sense.*

“What did he say about the other company?”

“We didn’t talk a lot about that. We mostly talked about perceptions of faithfulness and how his coworkers view disloyalty. He said there were no second chances where he worked. Once you show you aren’t dedicated to the company, they pretty much disown you.”

*It’s more like they bury you somewhere out in the desert.*

“Did he say when he was going to make a switch?” I asked.

“No, only that he was going to do something soon. It was the first thing I thought of when he didn’t show up on Monday. He’s always called in advance when he needed to cancel. When Cousin Suzie called, it really started to worry me.”

“Do you know if he has anywhere he goes when he wants to get away? An apartment somewhere or a place on a beach? Maybe a favorite hotel in Vegas?”

“He has a place outside of Strawberry. John only talked about it once. He called it his retreat. It was pretty obvious he felt the information was confidential, but if it can help find him, I think you should know about it.”

“Any idea where it is? There are a lot of cabins in that area.”

“No. Strawberry’s all I know.”

“Thanks for telling us,” I said. “It should be helpful in finding Johnny.”

“Before you go,” Beatrix said, “stay here a minute. There’s something I want both of you to have.”

Beatrix went into the main part of the store while we figured out what to do next.

“Sophie, do you think the magic software could dig up where Johnny’s cabin in the woods is?”

“I don’t see why not. It seems to find everything else. There must be tax records. If we can put those together with something associated with Johnny, we should be able to make a connection.”

“Perfect. If we can find out where the cabin is, I’ll go up and take a look. Maybe he’s hiding up there?”

A few minutes later, Beatrix came back with two small white boxes.

“If I’d been able to do a full reading on each of you,” she said, “I’d be able to fine tune your needs. But you’re both pretty easy and these should be helpful.”

Beatrix handed Sophie a box and she opened it. Inside was a polished green and white stone, about two inches in diameter. Sophie looked at Beatrix with a questioning look on her face.

“That’s a green kyanite stone. I can see you don’t have any problems in the romance department. In fact, I sense that maybe you’re challenged with having too many men in your life. If you hold the stone while making a decision, it will give you focus to see what’s important. It will help you see into your heart and make good decisions, especially in romance.”

“Wow,” Sophie said. “You nailed that one. Thanks.”

“You were a little tougher,” Beatrix said to me, opening the other box. “But I sense you’re often in danger and could probably use these.”

She reached into the box and pulled out a polished black stone. It was about an inch thick by two and a half inches in diameter. I took it and held it up to the light. Instead of being solid black, the stone was transparent with iridescent reds, yellows, and oranges all through it. As I turned the stone, the colors shimmered and moved.

“Agates are stones of protection and the fire agate is probably the strongest of them all,” Beatrix said. “It won’t stop bullets, of course, but it will protect you from many types of harm, both spiritually and emotionally.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

Beatrix then held up a clear sparkly crystal, about a half an inch wide by three inches long. “This is pointed white quartz. It’s the master healing crystal. If the fire agate is overcome, nothing can do more to help you recover if you’re injured, physically or mentally.”

“Thank you,” I said, “they’re beautiful.”

It wasn’t as if I believed in crystal powers, but I shivered a little when she talked about me being injured. It sounded too much like a prediction. I decided to keep both the stone and the crystal in my bag, at least for a little while.

“As long as you’re here,” Beatrix said, “you’ll need to go to a vortex. The stones and the crystal are powerful on their own, but if you charge their native strength with the energy of a vortex, they’ll work all the better.”

“Could you explain the vortex thing?” I asked.

“Sure. A vortex is an area of concentrated energy rising from the earth. Some people believe the vortices are portals for celestial and terrestrial spirits. I’m not sure I’d go that far, but I do know I feel great whenever I’m near one.”

“Can you see a vortex?” Sophie asked. “Is it like a rainbow? It would be cool to stand in the middle of a vortex rainbow.”

“A lot of people have looked, but I’ve never seen a picture of a vortex,” Beatrix said. “It’s more of a feeling. Some people feel it as a tingling on exposed skin or as a vibration emanating from the ground. Sometimes there’s a sensation across the nape of the neck and the shoulder blades.”

Sophie looked a little confused.

“Oh, I can’t explain a vortex,” Beatrix said. “You’ll have to go and experience one.”

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We all piled into my car and we headed into the main Sedona tourist district. Sophie said that a hot fudge sundae sounded like a good idea before the drive back into Scottsdale and I couldn’t argue with that.

I parked a block off the highway and we spent half an hour walking through the tourist shops lining the main road. Sophie and Suzie both got cute T-shirts that had been dyed using the native Sedona red clay. Finally,

we came to the ice cream parlor and we all had a sundae. We grabbed a table outside that had a nice view of the guys as they walked by on the street.

“Well, are we going to stop at a vortex?” Sophie asked, her mouth full of hot fudge. “It’d be a shame to come all this way and not go to one. Besides, I have to charge up my love stone.”

I looked over at Suzie.

“I’ve never seen a vortex,” she said. “Maybe we’ll find one today.”

Chapter Five

According to the map, the closest vortex was supposed to be on the west side of Bell Rock. We cruised to the trailhead and drove around the crowded parking lot until we found someone who was leaving. I parked and everyone got out. Sophie and Suzie had their phones at arm's length and were both snapping pictures as we looked for the trail that would take us to the vortex.

We eventually found the trailhead and walked three or four hundred yards down the path. None of us had worn shoes for hiking and I was beginning to think hunting for a vortex was a bad idea. We rounded a bend in the trail and it flattened out to a clearing about fifty or sixty yards in diameter. Next to us, the red sandstone of Bell Rock towered over our heads. There were fifteen or twenty people walking around or standing in small groups. One woman was standing with her arms spread wide and her face pointed to the sky. Another couple was sitting together on a large flat rock, both of them in a yoga position.

"It looks like we found it," I said.

"I don't see anything," Suzie said as she glanced around.

"Me neither," Sophie said. "I was really hoping for a rainbow coming up from the ground. I, at least, expected the air to be shimmering or something."

The three of us walked around the clearing for about ten minutes. I was waiting for something to happen, but as far as I could tell, nothing tingled or vibrated and I didn't get any psychic visions. I honestly hadn't expected anything to occur, but I was still a little disappointed.

Sophie and Suzie had climbed onto a large flat rock and were looking around the clearing. They were both talking and laughing, so I walked over to where they were standing.

"Well?" I said as I looked up at them.

Suzie shook her head.

"I don't see a vortex anywhere," Sophie said. "But it is pretty. Come up on our rock and look at the view from up here."

I climbed up and looked around. Sophie was right. The view from the rock lookout was amazing. The reds and oranges from the rocks nicely combined with the greens from the trees and the dark blue of the sky. It looked like an artist's oil painting. The colors were so vivid they almost seemed to shimmer.

"I love this place," Suzie said and she started laughing. Her laughter was infectious and soon Sophie and I were laughing, too. I stopped worrying about my frustrations over my bills and over my job. I even stopped stressing about Max and Reno and instead took in the gorgeous scenery. It was wonderful to be someplace so beautiful with friends.

I could have stayed on our rock all afternoon. Sophie and Suzie must have felt the same way because we stood there for almost half an hour, laughing, enjoying the colors, and watching the people as they walked around the clearing.

"Well," I said at last. "It's nice here, but I never did see the vortex."

"Nope," Sophie said. "Damn disappointing after the big buildup."

"I know," Suzie said. "We didn't find the vortex, but we did find this rock. From now on, this will be 'our rock' in Sedona. Whenever any of us comes up here, we need to promise to stand on our rock and think about what a nice time we all had here today."

"I can do that," Sophie said.

"That's a great idea," I said. "I promise."

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We hiked to my car and drove back down to Scottsdale. As the elevation got lower, the saguaro cactus again became numerous and the air started to get hot. My air-conditioning seemed to have completely given out. Suzie fiddled with the knobs for several minutes, but it did no good. We put up our hair again and opened the windows. By the time we made it down to the office, everyone was hot and miserable.

I parked in the back and we went through the security door. It felt great to be greeted with the cool air. I grabbed some Diet Pepsis and bottles of water from the fridge in the breakroom and we all went up to reception. Sophie started typing into the search program while Suzie and I sat on the couch.

After about ten minutes, everyone was starting to feel better. Sophie finished entering the new information into the search program and then started to shut her computer down.

“I’m getting hungry,” I said. “Would either of you like to get some drinks and appetizers?”

“That would be great, but I can’t tonight,” Sophie said. “I’ve got a date in about two hours with Snake. I need to go home and get ready.”

“Snake?” Suzie asked.

“Sophie’s dating the new third-string quarterback for the Cardinals,” I said, then looked back at Sophie. “I thought you couldn’t date him during training camp?”

“Well, he’s not supposed to do anything outside of camp, but he sent me a text wanting to get together tonight. I think he needs some affection.”

“I think I know what he wants,” I said. “Don’t you think you’ll ruin him for football tomorrow?”

“Hey, he’s a professional athlete. I bet he has enough gas in his tank for both me and football.”

“Until three weeks ago, he was a volleyball coach at Maricopa Community College. Be gentle with him.”

“Drinks sound great,” Suzie said. “I’ve already canceled everything for tonight, so I’m free.”

“Great,” I said. “I’m sure Lenny won’t mind if we expense it.”

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Suzie and I walked down the street to the Casablanca Lounge. It’s a relaxing place at one of the best locations in Scottsdale. As we walked up the stairs, I realized I hadn’t been here since I’d been here with Max, almost two months before. The thought both made me happy and a little sad at the same time.

We got a table facing the Scottsdale skyline. A waitress took our orders and quickly came back with the drinks and a cheese board. We spent a few minutes sipping and looking out over the city, neither of us talking. It had been a long day for both of us.

“Thank you for letting us know about Beatrix,” I said. “She’s nice. When you talk to her, thank her again for the gifts. She had some useful information and it was great to get up to Sedona again.”

“I had a good time, too. Sophie’s great. I can see why you like her so much.”

“She’s been my best friend since she I met her at a concert about three years ago. When I first found out about your hobby, I told Sophie about you. She loves spanking guys and is always on the lookout for a firm butt to paddle. If you ever find a decent guy who’s looking for an actual girlfriend, keep her in mind.”

“I’ll do that. Sometimes when I audition a new boy, it turns out he’s looking for a romantic relationship, not a mistress. I typically turn these guys down since it usually ends in heartache, at least on their side. But if I ever come across a decent man like that again, I’ll make an introduction.”

“Sophie would like that. She doesn’t have any problems finding men, but she’s had some trouble finding the right one.”

“What about Gina? Is she always so serious?”

“Not at all. Gina worked for several years as a Scottsdale police detective. Being focused and unemotional is part of the training they get. Lenny had to pay top dollar to get her to leave the department. If I ever go into battle, I’d want her at my side. Plus, once you put a few drinks in her she becomes the life of the party.”

“You have some great friends. I’m glad I got a chance to meet them.”

“When you and Lenny talked to the police this morning, did it seem like they would take Johnny’s disappearance seriously?”

“I think so,” Suzie said. “Although I got the sense this is very routine and they’re only going down a standard checklist. They’re doing background checks and looking through hospital admissions to see if they can find him. They’ll run traces on his phone and his credit cards. The detective who talked to us seemed sincere, but I guess we’ll see what happens.”

“I’ve already talked with Johnny’s employer. They’re as worried as you are and they’ve already started pursuing this with their own resources. His boss knows about you, in a general sense. He referred to you as Johnny’s girlfriend.”

Suzie's eyes softened and her lips curled up in a sweet smile. "Can you see why I love my guys so much? John and I share something that's as deep as most romantic relationships. I'm flattered he'd openly refer to me as his girlfriend. Thanks for letting me know. If circumstances ever have me, John, and his co-workers together, I'll make sure to act appropriately."

Suzie looked across the bar with unfocused eyes. I could see talking about Johnny was upsetting her. I decided to change the subject and ask her about something that was bugging me.

"One thing has everyone puzzled," I said. "I'm sure you make a lot as Mistress McNasty. You could probably live anywhere. Why do you live in our apartment house? It's kind of a dump."

Susie laughed and flashed me a smile, her thoughts now distracted from Johnny. "Well, I have an apartment there, but I don't live in the building anymore. You were over at my place. You saw how I'd turned the bedroom into a dungeon. It's where I started out and I've always kept it. It's close to downtown Scottsdale and to ASU. It's easy for my clients to get away from work and have their sessions with me. Plus, I still teach two classes a week and it's convenient for that. I have a similar place near downtown Phoenix for my clients who work over there. I live in a house in Paradise Valley."

"If you don't actually live in the apartment building, don't you think somebody'll catch on and you'll get kicked out?"

"No, that won't happen." She motioned me to move closer so she could whisper. "Don't tell anyone, but I own the building."

"You own the building? You're serious? It never struck me as the kind of real estate anyone would want to buy."

"Well, I bought my apartment back when it was a condominium. I'd just started out then as an associate professor at ASU. The place was relatively close to campus and it was affordable. I started up the Mistress McNasty business and it sort of took on a life of its own. Before I knew what happened, I'd converted my bedroom into a dungeon and was sleeping on the couch. I realized at some point somebody would give me a hard time about my modifications. I didn't want to move, so I bought the building."

"Um, if you own the building, have you thought about keeping up the maintenance better? The place is starting to look a little run down."

“I keep the rents at break-even with building costs. If I added maintenance staff, repainted, and replaced the crappy carpet we have, I’d need to increase rents on everybody. People who pay a lot for an apartment might not like living with Mistress McNasty or some of the other strange people we have living there. I recommend the building to all of my grad students. It keeps the apartments full and gives the place a nice upbeat feel.”

“Something else I’m still curious about. Why would anyone pay you that much to spank them? I don’t understand that at all.”

“I know we’ve talked about this before and it’s sort of hard to explain if you aren’t into the lifestyle. It’s not just the floggings and blindfolds my boys are paying for. Anyone can do that. Given a chance, a lot of wives would probably be glad to grab a paddle and spank their husband’s ass until it was cherry-red. But my boys are looking for a complete fantasy.”

Suzie must have seen the look of confusion on my face.

“It’s like this,” she said. “I have a client who’s always had a secret crush on his high school English teacher. He said he would sit in her class and dream about her taking control over him. Actually, that fantasy is very popular. I call it the *Cruel Teacher and the Bad Student*. We do a complete role-play and he really gets into it. Some guys have fantasies about being stuck in a hospital bed with a beautiful but sadistic nurse. One client likes to fantasize he’s been kidnapped by a women’s biker gang. We role-play that he’s shackled in a basement dungeon in the gang’s headquarters. Each week a new member of the gang comes down to abuse him. It sometimes gets into some pretty elaborate role-playing with some unusual makeup, wigs, and costumes. A couple of weeks ago, one of my boys confessed he sits in his office and daydreams of being disciplined by his secretary. In the real world that won’t ever happen. But with me, we can get pretty close.”

“So, it’s not only about whips and handcuffs?”

“Sometimes. I think my boys mostly appreciate having someone who understands their needs. That alone is worth a lot to them.”

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Suzie and I ended up sharing another cheese board along with another round of drinks. We then walked back to the office and called it a night. I would have called Reno and maybe stopped by his place, but I knew he was

working and wouldn't be home until after midnight. Although it was only eight o'clock, I was bone tired and wanted to get in some sleep while I could.

As I drove home, I went over what I knew about Johnny's disappearance. I had to admit, even though I was doing all the right things so far, I had nothing.

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I took the elevator to my floor and walked down to my apartment. As I passed by Grandma Peckham's door, I heard what sounded like *Dancing with the Stars*. I knew Grandma recorded the show each week and watched each episode a couple of times. Since Grandpa Bob didn't strike me as a fan of dance, Grandma was most likely alone. I knocked and a minute later Grandma opened the door and invited me in.

As I expected, Marlowe was asleep on his chair. He briefly lifted his head, stretched his front paws, and then flopped over on his side, instantly returning to sleep. Grandma walked back from the refrigerator with two Diet Pepsis.

"Here you go. This time of night I usually drink caffeine-free."

"That's perfect," I said opening the soda. "I only came over to say hello. We haven't talked in weeks. I think I talk to Grandpa Bob more than I talk to you. How's it going with him? Lately, he seems to be over here two or three times a week."

Grandma sighed and looked somewhat sad.

"Honestly, I don't know what I'm going to do with Bob. He's a sweet man and he's a tiger in the sack, but he's starting to talk about getting serious and moving in together. I think I told you I'm not looking for that. I'm with him for some company and some action in the bedroom, not to set up house. I only want a boyfriend not a new husband."

"Have you talked to Grandpa Bob about this? Maybe you should think about dating other men and keeping your options open?"

"Well, I haven't talked to Bob about it yet, but I do have a date set up for tomorrow with a new man. His name is Ray. He's one of the men I met on the website."

A few months ago, Grandma had put an ad on a dating website called *NaughtyMatureBabes.com*. It featured explicit pictures of naked seniors who were looking for casual relationships. Grandma asked me to take a few naked pictures of her, but I convinced her to take some selfies in front of her bathroom mirror instead.

“Is he nice?” I asked. “Tell me about him.”

“Well, he’s a retired airline pilot and he’s a few years younger me. He seemed nice on the phone and from his pictures, he has a big penis. I don’t know if he had to take a blue pill for the pictures, but it looks like it still works pretty good.”

“Um, okay. I guess it’s probably best to know about that ahead of time.”

“Lord, yes. I told you about the time I went over to Walter Dobson’s house for sex and how he almost cried when his penis wouldn’t work. Ever since then I’ve made a habit of asking first.”

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At seven thirty the next morning, I drove down to Curry Street and then over to Southwest Desert. I parked, and as I walked to the main entrance, I looked around, but nothing seemed amiss. When I went into the office, Danielle was working at her desk. She looked up when she heard me and smiled.

“I’m glad you came back,” she said. “Sometimes people say they’ll work here, but then I never see them again. Even if they show up, they only stay for a week or two. I guess the work is too boring and it scares them away.”

Danielle introduced me to Phyllis and Irene, two seniors who had been with the company since they opened the office, almost a year previously. Phyllis handled local billing and Irene took care of the scheduling. My job was to help them both.

On the back wall of the office was a door leading to the warehouse and loading docks. Stenciled in black letters was *Keep Out - Authorized Personnel Only*. When Danielle came over, I asked her about it. “Does that mean us or are we authorized?”

“No, the office staff isn’t allowed into the warehouse or the docks. Don’t worry. I don’t think anything secret’s going on back there. I think they’re worried we’ll hurt ourselves and ruin their safety record.”

I spent the first two hours with Phyllis learning the billing and the second two hours with Irene learning the scheduling. Danielle's assessment of the job was correct. There didn't seem to be a lot to either job except for a lot of mindless filing and repetition. By eleven thirty, I was more than ready to get out for the day.

As I was filing the last stack of papers for Phyllis, the door to the warehouse opened and three men came through. Although I didn't recognize any of them, creepy unease washed over me. Maybe it was the way they handled themselves, but I saw gangster written all over them. Two of the men were speaking Spanish and one was speaking English, but everyone seemed to understand each other well enough. The man speaking English carried a piece of paper that looked like one of the company's standard trailer-loading documents.

The three men went into Mr. Williams' office and closed the door. I tried not to be conspicuous as I walked over to the office so I could hear the men talking inside. I opened a drawer in a nearby filing cabinet and pretended to shuffle through the papers inside. Unfortunately, between the closed door and the overall background noise of the office, I wasn't able to make out a thing.

Ten minutes went by before the door opened again. One of the men held the door open, but all three were still talking.

"We'll have everything over in two days," the man who spoke English said. "If everything goes as planned, all will be forgiven, not to mention we'll make a lot of money."

One of the men who spoke Spanish said something and they all laughed.

*Okay, what has them so excited?*

The men walked through the office and went through the door to the back. When I heard their voices fade down a back hallway, I glanced into the office. The paper was still laying on the desk. I looked around, but Danielle wasn't at her desk. Telling myself that this was probably a bad idea, I casually walked into the office.

The paper on the desk was indeed a packing order. I couldn't make out any of the things that were to be loaded into the trailer, it was mostly numbers and letters of pallets, each of which would have a separate loading

sheet. My eyes instead focused on two things. The first was the trailer number: DL4358. The second was the date and time the trailer was to be loaded. I glanced at the calendar on the wall. Whatever was going to happen would happen tomorrow night on the graveyard shift. That gave me about thirty-six hours to figure out what I needed to do with the information.

*I can see myself doing something very naughty tomorrow tonight.*

I casually walked back to my desk. Neither Phyllis, nor Irene, had noticed anything and Danielle was walking back from the bathroom. Less than a minute later, one of the men who spoke Spanish came back through the warehouse door and walked into Mr. Williams' office. He picked up the paper and returned to the warehouse.

At five minutes to twelve, everyone started packing up to go out for lunch. Danielle walked over to my desk. I was packing up to leave for the day.

"Hey, Laura," she said. "Would you like to do lunch with us? It's your first day and I'll buy."

"I can't today," I said. "But I'm going to dinner tomorrow with a couple of friends of mine. We usually go to Old Town Gringos on Craftsman Court. Why don't you join us?"

"Sure. I'd like that. Let me know when and I'll meet you there."

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I drove back to the office, trying to ignore the hot air coming from my air conditioner. I wanted to talk with Sophie about what she'd been able to find out about Johnny. When I walked up to the front office, instead of Sophie, I was met with the stench of a microwaved cat.

Amber was working at the filing cabinet next to Sophie's desk. She wore a thin blue cotton skirt and a tight yellow scoop-neck T-shirt with a big red heart printed on it. She had her headphones on and I could hear the music blasting as she bounced her head to the beat. As I walked closer to her, my stomach started to clench and my eyes began to water. I knew if I stayed around Amber for too long, I'd get a fierce headache.

I walked next to the filing cabinet so that she could see me. I waved and she took off her headphones.

“Hi, Amber, is Sophie around?”

“No, you like, um, missed her and stuff. She took off like an hour ago. She said she wanted to get an early lunch. If we only get an hour, she should be back soon, you know? I’m about to go to lunch, too. All of this filing is making my head spin. Trying to remember the alphabet all day long really sucks, especially the part past T. I always get those letters messed up and have to do the *A-B-C* song to get them right.”

This was the first time I’d been alone with Amber. Even though she wasn’t very bright and she was causing us a lot of trouble, she didn’t seem to be actively mean or evil. Perhaps only a little lost. I tried to think of something nice to say.

“You’re wearing the same perfume as before? It’s, um, uncommon.”

“Do you like it?” Amber asked as she brightened. “I know it’s a little unusual. It’s called *Philistine Nights*. It’s a custom blend of all-natural ingredients. You can only get it at this one small perfume shop in Istanbul. I first got it when my father sent me traveling after I graduated from high school and now I get it on the internet. It’s super expensive, but totally worth it. I know you won’t believe it, but it’s made with real urine they get from pregnant female camels. They boil it down to concentrate it. The urine contains pheromones men can’t resist. Believe me, one whiff of this and men are helpless.”

Maybe because it knocks them unconscious?

“I don’t think Sophie likes it,” Amber continued. “When I get close to her, I can see her stomach tighten and her eyes tear up and stuff.”

I had a sudden inspiration. “Sophie’s a little sensitive to perfumes lately. She’s having, um, morning sickness.”

“Sophie’s pregnant? Wow, that’s a bummer, you know?”

“Yeah, it’s a secret, so don’t tell anyone, but strong scents only make it worse. Perhaps if you could not wear as much or maybe even switch to another one?”

“Well, I can’t stop wearing it. It’s my trademark and my secret weapon around men. But maybe you’re right. If she’s pregnant, I’ll only put on a little. I should probably save it for when I’m out on a date or when I know a rich client’s coming into the office. Then I’ll give him both barrels.”

“Good idea,” I said. “If it’s as hard to get and expensive as you say, you probably shouldn’t waste it on us.”

Amber gathered her things and went out the front door for lunch. Thirty seconds later Sophie came in.

“God, I thought she’d never leave,” Sophie said as she sat down at her desk. “I was waiting in the art gallery across the street. I can’t stand to be around Amber any more today. When she first came in, I thought I’d be okay, but then she started filing in the cabinet next to my desk. My head started spinning and I thought I’d lose it. Hey, I’ve decided I know what she smells like. Amber smells like a pile of stinky garbage that’s been set on fire, then someone put out the fire by peeing on it.”

I thought about it for a minute. The description was disgusting, but it was pretty accurate.

“I think you nailed it. Before she left, I asked her not to wear so much. Um, I told her you had morning sickness and the perfume was making it worse.”

“You told Amber I was pregnant? I’m not sure if that was a good idea. Things like that tend to take on a life of their own, but maybe it’ll be worth it if she stops wearing that shit. I can’t come to work and spend all day deciding if I’m going to throw up or not.”

“Have the names from Arizona Transnational come back yet?” I asked.

“Sure, I got those back last night.” She picked up a folder on her desk and slowly flipped through the papers as she read off the names. “Jessie Santos seems clean. No arrests, good employment, and her credit is okay. Same for Lindsay Mills. Darryl Watkins was arrested three years ago for simple assault, has a spotty work record, but his credit is six-fifty. Mike Malloy and Red Norgard are both clean and both have credit above seven hundred.”

“Alright, I still need to talk to Lindsay Mills. He’s a driver and will probably be hard to pin down.”

“You know, doing background checks on people at a trucking company is alright, but it was more exciting when we were looking for a treasure chest full of antique jewelry. I could do that all day.”

“Next time I come across another one of those, I’ll let you know. What have you been able to find out about Johnny? Anything stand out in his

financials?”

“A shitload. I need to talk to you about it. Some of it’s pretty wild and some of it I’m still trying to understand.”

Sophie took her key ring from her purse and used a key to unlock her desk drawer. She took out a thick file folder and laid it on her desk. “I didn’t want anyone to see this, especially Amber.”

“Well?”

“Well, at first I didn’t think I’d find anything. The standard search I ran yesterday showed Johnny has a checking and savings account, along with two brokerage accounts. Maybe half a million dollars in total. Pretty standard stuff. But when I entered the information from the other accounts you and Max found at Johnny’s house, it seemed to open everything up. The report started coming in overnight and was still churning out this morning.”

“Well? What did the magic software come up with?”

“Only about a dozen secret companies where Johnny is either the sole owner or is somehow deeply involved. Honestly, I don’t even think the IRS has this information on him. Most of these companies look like places for Johnny to store cash without anyone knowing he has it. I’m still adding everything up, but so far, I’ve found almost seventeen million dollars in his accounts. I’m kinda freaking out about it. I shouldn’t know this many details about someone like Johnny Scarpazzi. This is when I start getting creeped out at what the software can do. I seriously don’t think we’re supposed to have it.”

“Did you find out about the cabin up by Strawberry?”

“Yeah, I was on the lookout for that one. One of his secret companies has a division that lists an eighty-acre investment property about four miles west of Strawberry. It doesn’t say anything about structures on the property, but that must be it.”

From the folder, Sophie handed me a piece of paper that showed the location of the property on a map.

“Great, I’ll head up there and have a look around. Maybe I’ll find Johnny and clear this up today.”

“Um, there’s one other thing you should probably know about.”

“Well?”

“I found a company Johnny started up about three months ago. It’s not like the others. It seems to be a holding company with only one bank account. It’s in the Cayman Islands.”

“And?”

“Every week, this account gets about twenty thousand dollars transferred into it.”

“And?”

“The company transferring the money, it doesn’t exist.”

“If it doesn’t exist, how does it transfer money into Johnny’s account?”

“Don’t know. The transactions go through Hohokam National Bank, so that part’s local, but when I try to backtrack, all I get is a big nothing. It’s not often the secret software gets stumped.”

“Hohokam National is based out of Phoenix. Let’s see if Gina or Lenny have any contacts there. I get nervous when the magic software doesn’t know where the money’s coming from.”

“How’d your new job go?” Sophie asked. “Thinking about quitting here? I bet no one would want to shoot at you if you worked at a trucking company.”

“The job is dull and apparently they go through a lot of people there. I don’t think anyone would want to stay for long, but Danielle, the office manager, is nice. I asked her to join us for dinner tomorrow. Do you think Gina will mind or am I going to get another conflict-of-interest lecture?”

“Probably. It’s not the way the detective’s handbook would say to do it, but I don’t see why not. Actually, it might be nice going out with someone who isn’t a millionaire. Don’t get me wrong. I love the cougars, but I’m still sort of intimidated around them and I kind of feel bad that they always pay for everything.”

“You get the drinks from the men.”

“Well, yeah, but you know what I mean. It’ll be nice to meet someone who works in an office and can relate to being broke all the time.”

“We’ll need to remember not to talk too much about what we do. I don’t want her to piece together what I’m doing over at her office until the assignment is over. Then we can let her in on it.”

“Think she’ll get pissed? After all, you did sorta fib to her.”

“I hope not. I’ll explain I was casing the place and she caught me. Getting the job in the office was the best way to find out what was going on. She strikes me as the type of person who’ll see the irony of the situation.”

“I hope so. Some women wouldn’t see it as irony.”

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Strawberry is a cute mountain village at the base of the Mogollon Rim. It’s about ten miles up the road from Payson, next to the adjoining community of Pine. Every time I drive through Pine and Strawberry there seems to be some sort of fair or festival going on. The main streets are crowded with restaurants and shops, most of which are open year-round.

After the pleasant hour and a half drive up the Beeline Highway, I made it to Strawberry. The cooler temperatures of the mountains felt great. At one point, I even closed my windows because it was getting too cool. I turned down Fossil Creek Road and into the main residential section of the village. After a mile, most of the cabins thinned out and I went another four miles into the forest. The GPS instructed me to turn north onto an unnamed dirt road. This road wound up the side of a mountain for a half a mile and ended at a sturdy metal gate placed across the road. Boulders had been placed on either side of the gate making it difficult to drive around.

I parked the Honda and got out. Although not visible from the gate, the walk to the cabin turned out to be less than three hundred yards. I didn’t try to sneak up on the building. I’ve found that sneaking up on a place and peeping in the windows is the best way to get shot at. Instead, I marched up to the porch, went to the front door, and knocked.

“Hello,” I called out. “Johnny, it’s Laura Black. Are you in there?”

I knocked a couple more times and looked in the windows until I was convinced that no one was in the cabin. I had a lock-pick kit I had gotten from Gina and I began to work at opening the door. I’m not as good as she is and it took me almost twenty minutes to open the two deadbolts.

I opened the door and my heart sank as I saw the alarm pad on the wall. It had been set and was currently beeping and doing a thirty-second countdown. Since I didn't know the code to disarm it, I waited for the inevitable. At zero, a piercing alarm went off. I only hoped it was a local alarm and wasn't sending out a signal to a security response team or the police.

After five minutes, the siren shut off and I was able to think again. I used my time to look around the small cabin. Unfortunately, there wasn't a lot to see. There were the basics you'd expect to see in any mountain lodge. A small kitchen, a bed, a couple of chairs, and a bookshelf full of westerns and adventure stories. The only thing that looked out of place was a rug in the corner next to a blank wall. No one would ever stand there, so the rug seemed unnecessary. I walked over and flipped it aside. Underneath was a sturdy metal trapdoor with a padlock on it.

I got the lock-pick kit, sat on the floor, and went to work. Again, it took me over fifteen minutes, but I was finally able to open the lock. I opened the trap door and looked down into the basement. All I could see was a set of stairs leading downward into the darkness.

"Johnny," I called out, "It's Laura Black. I'm only here to make sure you're okay. I'm about to come down."

No one responded and no shots rang out, so I climbed down the stairs into the black basement.

As my foot hit the floor, it must have tripped a switch. Lights flickered for a second, then the room lit up brightly. A bank of computers and monitors against the far wall came to life. I could also hear fans starting up and felt fresh cool air coming in from one of the overhead vents. The space below the cabin was much bigger than the cabin itself. They must have dug out a big hole and built the basement first. They then put a roof over everything and built the cabin on top.

I walked around the basement and saw it was a fully functional space. There was a modern kitchen, a large storeroom full of non-perishable and freeze-dried food, a separate bedroom, a living area with a big screen TV, and a nice bathroom. I went to the sink in the kitchen and tried the tap. Water came pouring out and I assumed there was a large water tank buried

somewhere nearby. I could see someone living comfortably here for several months or even a year.

I walked to a cabinet and opened the door. Inside was an arsenal of about twenty military assault rifles and what I could only assume were grenade launchers.

*I guess it's one of the perks of dabbling in the arms smuggling business.*

I looked at the bank of monitors. They were apparently linked up to cameras scattered around the property. On one monitor, I saw my car sitting next to the gate on the road. One camera showed the interior of the cabin, and several showed the land surrounding the cabin. Actually, this would be the perfect place to ride out a zombie apocalypse.

I was a little depressed I hadn't been able to find Johnny, but I did have the location of somewhere he would most likely go, at least at some point.

# Chapter Six

It was a beautiful day in the mountains and the drive back was peaceful. As I was passing through the town of Payson, I called Suzie to download her on my progress.

“I went up to the cabin in Strawberry and we’re still running the financials. The cabin is empty. It doesn’t look like anyone’s been up there for a while. The financials look clean with the exception of some strange transactions going through Hohokam National Bank to an account Johnny has in the Cayman Islands. I’ll be working with Lenny and Gina to see if we can get any information about it from the bank. Has Johnny said anything to you about getting money from someone on a weekly basis?”

“No, John and I seldom talk business, but if you need a bank contact, I know someone there who may be able help us. If he’s in town, I can probably arrange a meeting for tomorrow morning. He works in the headquarters building in downtown Phoenix.”

“That would be great. Getting information out of a bank can be tricky. If you have someone who would help it would probably save us a lot of time.”

“Actually, that would work out for me as well. I’ve been meaning to talk with him about another matter. This way we can kill two birds at once. I’ll see if I can set something up for ten o’clock. I could meet you at your office at about nine. If you type up the questions you need to have answered, we can give them to my contact tomorrow.”

“Perfect. See you tomorrow at nine.”

I then called Lenny and gave him the same download with the addition of Suzie’s bank contact and possible meeting in the morning. Lenny’s enthusiasm was restrained. “All you’re doing so far are background activities. I actually need you to find the guy, not just put together a nice file on him. His phone’s been off since Monday and there’ve been no hits on his credit cards. That means he’s either in hiding, held under duress, or dead. You say he’s not hiding in the most likely place, so cross that one off the list for now. If he’s dead, both our client and Tony DiCenzo might suspect it was due to our incompetence. So, let’s hope he’s still alive and being held somewhere. That’s what you need to be doing. Find out where he’s being

held. If you do that, the police can raid the place or DiCenzo can send his boys in. Either way, we're off the hook if it all goes south."

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At eight o'clock, I came back into Scottsdale. The sunset was beautiful and it made the drive even nicer. I had a sudden inspiration and called Reno. I wasn't sure if he'd be at work, but he answered right away.

"Hey," I said. "Are you working tonight?"

"I got back from a meeting at the district station a few minutes ago. I need to go back for a shift at the warehouse in about two and a half hours. Why? Are you off?"

"Yup, I think I'm done chasing my tail for the night. If you have a couple of hours, do you want to get together? We can either meet for dinner or I could come over to your place."

"Are you hungry?"

"I'd rather have you."

"I was thinking the same thing. How soon can you make it over here?"

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

~~~~~

I left Reno's house at about ten thirty. For some reason, I still wasn't all that sleepy. The activities at Reno's seemed to have perked me up. I decided to head back up to Arizona Transnational to see if anything was going on. I also wanted to see if Lindsay Mills was there. He was the driver who had supposedly gotten into a fight with the driver from Southwest Desert. There wasn't a lot of traffic and I made it up to the Scottsdale Airpark in about twenty minutes.

I stopped at the guard shack and introduced myself to an older man named Mac. He said he had been hired the day before to watch over things on the afternoon shift. He said nothing had happened on either of his two days at work. I handed him my card and asked him to call me if anything came up. A minute later Manuel pulled into the parking lot and relieved Mac.

I asked Manuel if anything unusual had happened since we talked on Tuesday.

“Not a thing. They installed two new cameras at the back fence yesterday. That brings the total to nine. If something happens anywhere on the property, we’ll at least have pictures.”

I again asked him to call me if anything strange occurred, then went into the warehouse.

I found Red Norgard, the night manager, and asked him if Lindsay Mills had come in. He said he’d seen him about a half-hour before and thought he was waiting on a trailer to be loaded before he took off again.

I walked through the building and found Lindsay in the breakroom talking to Jessie Santos. As Red had thought, he was waiting on a trailer to be loaded so he could take off to Canada again. “This is the last load I have this week,” he said. “When I get back, I’ll have three days off.”

I said I needed to talk to him about what had happened. Jessie stood up and told him to drive safely. She then went back to her office, leaving me alone with Lindsay.

“Can you tell me what happened the night you got into the fight?”

“It’s not a big deal and it really wasn’t a fight. I’d just got back from a run to Alberta and a few of us went over to the Voodoo Lounge for a beer. It’s the bar down the street where the drivers here usually end up.

“Anyway, there was a guy there who got in my face and we ended up shoving each other around. But there were four of us and only one of him, so he left. Like I said it wasn’t a big deal until the fires started happening. Red asked everyone if anything unusual had happened to any of us and so I told him about it.”

“What did the guy look like?”

“He was a little older than me. Medium height, brown hair, no mustache, and I didn’t see any tattoos. I’d never seen him before.”

“How do you know he was a driver for Southwest Desert?”

“He had a Southwest Desert shirt on. The kind of shirt a driver would wear.”

I thanked him, then went back to talk with Jessie. She was sitting at her desk typing information into her computer.

“Hey,” I said. “When we talked before, you said you were dating a driver who works here. Is that Lindsay?”

“Sure, it’s not a secret or anything. We’ve been going together about three months now.”

“You also said you had dated a guy from Southwest Desert named Lew Lockridge. What’s he look like?”

“He’s older than me by about eight or nine years. Brown hair, a little taller than me.”

“Do you think it’s possible he’s the one Lindsay got into a fight with?”

“I don’t know. But I stopped seeing Lew four or five months ago. Why would he want to start a fight with Lindsay?”

“Maybe he hasn’t gotten over it yet?”

I thanked her and left the office. I then spent fifteen minutes walking around the property looking for anything unusual. When that didn’t pan out, I waved goodbye to Manuel, headed back to my car, and drove home.

~~~~~

At eight o’clock the next morning, I pulled into my parking space behind the law office. Sophie’s yellow Volkswagen convertible and Lenny’s red Porsche were the only other cars, so I knew Gina and Amber weren’t in yet. I was about to unlock the rear security door when a brand-new white Mazda CX-5 pulled into the guest parking spot. The temporary tags showed it to be less than two weeks old. The car door opened and Amber stepped out. She looked a little spacey as she walked past me and into the rear offices. She still smelled like peed-on burning garbage, but it wasn’t as strong as it had been.

“Um, hi Amber.”

“Uuuh, this getting to work at eight in the morning really sucks. I don’t know how you do it. I was at a party last night and left before midnight and stuff, but even with that I almost didn’t wake up on time today.”

“But you made it. That’s what counts.”

Amber punched in at the time clock. We then walked over to our cubicles and dropped off our purses.

“Yeah, I got a lecture from my dad yesterday about being prompt at work and doing a good job. I told him I don’t think a law office job is for me and I told him I wanted to go back to bartending and stuff. But he said I needed to stick with this one, you know?”

“You want to quit? Don’t you know why you’re here?”

“To make money, duh. Why does anyone go to a crappy job they can’t stand?”

“Yes, but why are you at this job?”

“Because my dad told me I needed to work here. I’m not sure why he’s so hot on me having this job. He only said it’s all part of the harassment thing he’s trying to do.”

“That’s all you know about why you’re here?”

“Dad’s always having me do stupid stuff like this. He has like ten or fifteen things going on at once. I never ask why he has me do stuff. He said if I was willing to stick it out here for at least a year, he’d get me a new car. I picked out the Mazda last week. It has a navigation system, backup camera, and everything.”

“It’s a nice car. Oh, thanks for not wearing so much perfume. It will be easier on Sophie.”

“Yeah, still a bummer about her being pregnant, you know.”

“Um, Sophie’s kinda sensitive about the whole pregnancy thing. It’s probably best not to talk about it.”

“Yeah, it would suck being pregnant. Who’s the father?”

Who’s the father? Shit, what do I say to that?

“Um, I’m not sure. I didn’t think it would be a good idea to pry.”

“Wow, I wonder if Sophie knows who it is? That would explain why she’s so touchy about it, you know?”

Amber said she needed caffeine and she started up a pot of coffee in the breakroom. I went up front to talk to Sophie. Lenny’s office door was closed. This was fine with me as it meant Sophie and I didn’t need to whisper. When I got to her desk, she was reading over the Southern California Surf Report.

“Both Doheny and Huntington Beach have overhead waves this morning,” she said.

“You read the surf report almost every day,” I said. “Why don’t we take a weekend and drive out there. You can rent a board and have some fun.”

“I’ve thought about it, but I haven’t surfed in almost ten years. I’d probably drown.”

“You won’t drown. Let’s pick a weekend sometime and go. You could wear the purple wet suit you’re always talking about. I’ll take lots of pictures.”

“Maybe, but I’d need to be in a good mood all week before I did something embarrassing like that.”

“I got an email this morning from Manuel, the guard at Arizona Transnational. They had a quiet night. Has anything new come in on Johnny?”

“Nope. No hits on his phone or his credit cards. I checked the printer, but it looks like the magic software is done sharing secrets on Johnny, at least for a while.”

“Hopefully Suzie’s contact at the bank can help us. I get the feeling if we can find out about the mystery payments it’ll go a long way toward clearing this up. Oh, I have a new name from Southwest Transport, Lew Lockridge. He a driver there and he was dating a woman who works at Arizona Transnational.”

“Okay, I’ll punch him in and we’ll see if he pays off his credit cards or not. Did I hear Amber back there with you?”

“Yup. I was talking to her and she’s totally clueless about why she’s working here. Her dad told her to work here, so she is. He even bought her a car to keep her happy about being here.”

“That explains a lot. Amber doesn’t seem smart enough to come up with this on her own.”

“Oh, the good news is, Amber’s toned down the perfume. The bad news is, she’s asking who the father is.”

“Oh, jeez. I told you these things take on a life of their own. Let’s hope we can keep the rumor confined to the office. I don’t need everyone

thinking I'm pregnant."

~~~~~

At five minutes to nine, Suzie came in the front door and greeted us with a huge smile.

"Were you able to set up a meeting?" I asked.

"Yes. I called Jules and he's expecting us at ten. Do you have the account information and all the questions you need to have answered?"

"Right here," Sophie said, handing Suzie an envelope.

"There's one thing," Suzie said. "In order for me to ask for assistance, it would be helpful if both of you could come along."

"Well, I'll need to check with Lenny," Sophie said. "He has me working on a shitload of stuff today and I think he's still a little annoyed I took the afternoon off to go up to Sedona."

"Is he in his office?" Suzie asked.

"Yeah, he's in going over the paperwork on a big divorce hearing that's coming up. His door's closed, so he might get pissy if we bug him."

"No problem," Suzie said. "I'm the client. I'll ask him."

Suzie walked across to Lenny's door, opened it, and went in. The door slowly swung shut behind her.

Sophie and I both wandered over to the door and moved our heads close so we could hear.

Sophie looked at me and whispered, "I swear, if Lenny starts making those gorilla noises again, I'm going to go in and toss a bucket of water on him. I still have a nasty image in my head from the last time with Amber."

We heard Suzie's quiet voice, but fortunately no moaning. What we heard instead was a *whoosh* sound followed by the sound of leather slapping hard against bare flesh. We then heard Lenny yelp, like a small dog that's been frightened. Ten seconds went by, then we heard another *whoosh* sound, the same smacking sound of leather on flesh, and Lenny yelping again. This went on for almost two minutes. The last couple of yelps Lenny gave out were kind of high pitched and desperate sounding.

The room went quiet, then we heard footsteps coming toward the door. Sophie and I quickly took a few steps back and tried to look as if we were only casually standing near Lenny's door and not trying to eavesdrop.

Suzie took a step out of the office, holding Lenny's belt in her hand. She turned, tossed the belt back into the office, and then closed the door.

From the intercom on Sophie's desk, Lenny's voice rang out. He was using his serious lawyer voice again, as if we all didn't know what had just happened. "Sophie, please go with Laura and Miss Lu to follow up the lead at Hohokam National Bank."

Suzie looked at us and smiled. "Are you both ready?"

~~~~~

We went out the back and got into my car. The air conditioner had completely died on the way down from Sedona, but fortunately the day wasn't too hot yet. We drove into downtown Phoenix and Suzie directed me to park in one of the bigger garages.

We followed her out of the garage and down the block to a tall glass skyscraper. We went into the massive lobby and Suzie led us to a security desk. We all produced ID's and were each given a plastic visitor's badge. For some reason, the badge the guard gave Suzie was gold and ours were blue.

We were directed to a bank of elevators and Suzie walked to one that was labeled *Authorized Personnel Only*. Next to this elevator stood another guard behind a podium. He looked at Suzie's badge and let us into the elevator.

"I take it you've been here before?" I asked.

"Oh, a few times."

The elevator only had one button labeled *Executive Level*. Suzie pressed it and we spent almost thirty seconds being rapidly lifted to the top of the building. My ears popped twice before we came to a stop.

As we rode the elevator, I looked over at Suzie. Her smile had faded and in its place was an intense, almost angry expression. Her face and body had taken on an attitude of control. It reminded me a little of Reno's cop-face. She looked over at us.

“When we go in, feel free to verbally taunt and degrade him. You’ll know when to do it. If you don’t know what to say, just point and laugh.”

What?

Sophie looked at me with a worried look on her face. I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders. I had no idea what Suzie was talking about, but it didn’t sound good.

The elevator doors opened to reveal a beautiful reception area decorated with comfortable leather furniture, thick carpeting, and original oils on the walls. A uniformed guard sat at a desk, but Suzie ignored him as we walked down the main hallway to a secondary reception area.

A well-dressed woman seated behind a large wooden desk greeted us and asked how she could help us.

“We’re here to see Jules Anthem,” Suzie said.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“Yes, please let him know Suzie Lu is here to see him.”

The woman looked skeptical as she picked up her phone and relayed the message. Sophie nudged me and when I looked, she pointed to the plaque next to a tall set of double doors. *Jules Anthem, President and CEO.*

The secretary hung up the phone. She looked annoyed, but said Mr. Anthem would see us.

We walked through the tall wooden doors and into a large corner office. Floor-to-ceiling windows gave beautiful views of downtown Phoenix and Camelback Mountain. To my surprise, Suzie turned and locked the doors behind us.

Standing behind a desk was a large and powerfully built man in a white button-down shirt and red tie. He was about fifty-years-old and had the look of a man who was accustomed to telling people what to do. He came around the desk and walked toward us. He looked like he was about to start talking to Suzie when he glanced over at us.

“Jules, these women are my trusted friends,” Suzie said. “Treat them as you’d treat me.”

The man fell to his knees. “Mistress, may I worship you?” His eyes looked up longingly at Suzie. To my surprise, it was the grateful look of a

man in love.

Suzie looked down at the man with a look of slightly annoyed indifference. “You may.”

The man crawled forward like a dog and began kissing her shoes. “Mistress, I’m so honored you and your friends have come to see me. It’s been too long since this slave has been allowed to serve you.” He then continued to kiss her shoes.

I looked at Sophie and saw she was as confused as I was about what to do. We both stood there and watched the man kissing Suzie’s feet.

“Enough of your groveling,” Suzie said. “You’re getting your foul slobber all over my beautiful shoes. You’re disgusting. Get up and assume the position of respect, quickly. Position yourself so these women can see what a truly useless man looks like.”

Suzie had a tone of command I found to be remarkable. With only her voice, she was controlling a man who could easily overcome her physically.

The man quickly got to his feet. He then spread his legs wide, put his hands behind his back, and bowed his head.

Suzie went up to the man and slowly walked in circles around him as she talked. “These women wanted to watch me humiliate one of my lesser slaves,” Suzie said in her soft and soothing voice. “Unfortunately, all of my real men are unavailable today, so I’m afraid you’ll have to do. I’ve already told my friends here how pathetic you are so they’re not expecting too much. They know you’re nothing but a deviant sexual failure. A sick pervert. You’re scum and not even worthy to kiss their beautiful feet.”

“Thank you, mistress. No, mistress, I’m not worthy.”

“I came to discuss something important with you,” Suzie said as she continued walking in slow circles around the man. “But first, we need to clear something up. I’m a little upset with you. You told me you had a big project coming up at work and you asked for a two-month sabbatical from seeing me. Against my better judgement, I generously granted your request. But now, almost three months have gone by and you haven’t yet made an appointment. You’re getting behind in your training. Why are you being so disrespectful to me? Explain yourself, slave, quickly.”

The man glanced up at Suzie, fear and panic in his eyes. “I’m sorry mistress. I’m in the middle of a hostile takeover of a very large company. I’m working eighty hours a week with my team of lawyers and accountants. The governmental review process is taking longer than anyone expected. I spend most of my time flying between here and New York with our investment bankers. I... *Oooof!*”

As the man was talking, Suzie casually walked up, placed her hands on his shoulders, and gave him a vicious knee to the groin. It was a hard shot and we heard the wet slapping *thud* of her knee smashing into his genitals. The force of the impact lifted the man several inches into the air and he cried out with a loud “*Oooof.*” He then fell to the floor and curled into the fetal position, moaning and panting hard. His eyes were tightly shut and his face had turned a dark-red.

What the hell?

The room went quiet except for the man moaning in pain. Sophie and I stood frozen in shock. She looked over at me with a growing look of panic. I again shook my head and shrugged my shoulders. Neither of us knew what to do with what had just happened.

Suzie circled the man once more, then bent down to talk. Her voice taking on a menacing tone.

“Bitch, I don’t care about your hostile takeover. Do you understand? Your balls belong to me and your balls are going to be back in my dungeon very soon. I would rather they were still attached to your body, but that’s completely your choice. If I have to remove your testicles and nail them to my dungeon wall as a warning to my other slaves, I’ll gladly do so. Do you understand me? Answer quickly.”

“Yes, mistress,” the man said as he moaned and cupped his crotch. “Forgive me, mistress.”

“Fine,” Suzie said. “Now get up and assume the position of respect. Pay close attention. I have something meaningful to discuss with you.”

With a deliberate effort, the man slowly got to his feet. His face was still red and was now covered with sweat. He leaned against his desk for a moment and visibly shook with pain. He then stood upright and faced Suzie, his legs again spread wide. He returned his hands behind his back

and lowered his head. Maybe it was me, but this time he seemed a little less eager to assume the position than he had a few minutes before.

“That’s better,” Suzie said. “Now then, one of my boys is in trouble and I need your help. I need to know what you can find out about this.” Suzie placed the envelope on the man’s desk. “Will you do this for me?”

The man looked up at her. “Yes, mistress. It will be my pleasure to serve you.”

Suzie walked up to the man, reached her hand out, and lightly ran her fingernails down the man’s face.

“You’ve been very obedient during our little session today,” Suzie said. “You’ve earned a small reward.”

Suzie reached down and firmly grabbed the bulge in the front of his trousers. The man moaned in surprise and pain. Suzie then gave a hard squeeze. The man sucked in some air and his body shuddered with a fresh wave of agony.

“Now then, slave,” Suzie said. “You’ve gotten behind in your training. I want you to make an appointment within the next two weeks. Tell me you understand.”

The man started to protest about the takeover reaching a critical stage and not having any free time. Suzie gave his package a hard twist. The man’s face turned red and he made a visible effort not to collapse back onto the floor.

“I couldn’t care less about your hostile takeover. You may fly me out to New York or wherever you happen to be.” She gave another firm twist, the man’s face turned darker-red. But I also saw the growing look of erotic pleasure on his face.

Okay, I didn’t expect that.

From next to me, I heard a weak and uncertain laugh. It was Sophie. She was laughing and pointing at the man. He glanced over at her and they held eye contact for a moment. The look of pleasure on his face only increased.

“Get me an adjoining suite at whatever hotel you’re staying,” Suzie said. “You can work on your takeover during the day and I’ll spend the nights training you to be a proper and obedient little slave. That will take your

mind off your lawyers and your hostile takeover.” Her voice strained with the effort of squeezing and twisting. “Tell me you understand.”

Instead of answering, the man’s body shook for almost ten seconds and he cried out in ecstasy. Suzie waited another ten seconds while he continued to shake. She then let go of the man and he collapsed on the floor, still panting and moaning.

Suzie slowly circled him twice, then sat on the floor next to the man. To my surprise, she reached out and softly caressed his face. He looked up at her with obvious affection.

“Now get yourself cleaned up,” she said. Her voice had returned to its quiet and soothing tone. “You have a big and important company to run. You don’t want your employees to see how worthless and pathetic you really are.”

“Yes, mistress,” the man said. His voice was weak and was coming out in gasps. “Thank you, mistress. I know I’m not worthy of the joy you bring to me. I’ll do as you command. Thank you, mistress.”

We watched as the man got up and stumbled to a door on the side of his office, presumably a private bathroom. Suzie unlocked the double office doors and we let ourselves out. The secretary gave us a questioning look, but otherwise didn’t say anything as we walked past.

We walked to the elevator and stepped in. As the doors closed, Suzie’s posture relaxed and she broke out in a huge smile.

“Oh my God,” she said. “Isn’t he great? He’s always been one of my favorites. Thank you both for your help. This hostile takeover thing has been bugging him for months and I know he’s under a lot of pressure. I’m glad we were able to do that for him.”

“Wait a minute,” Sophie said. “Are you saying he enjoyed that? I don’t think so. I saw what happened in there. The man almost vomited from pain. There isn’t any way he enjoyed that.”

“I sort of agree,” I said. “I expected him to call security and have us arrested.”

“What you have to understand about Jules,” Suzie said, “is that he has three main fetishes. He’s a total submissive, he craves public humiliation, and he’s an extreme masochist, a pain-whore, in other words. Being

punished and degraded in front of unfamiliar women is his biggest fantasy. I think he'll remember this day for a long time."

The doors to the elevator opened and we walked into the lobby.

Sophie looked around and lowered her voice. "You're saying he likes being kicked in the nuts?"

Suzie also lowered her voice. "He needs extreme pain to achieve a climax. It's rare, but it happens. When he first came to me, he explained his wife wouldn't hurt him no matter how much he asked. Of course, I don't have a problem with inflicting pain on a man."

"And he pays you to do that?"

"A thousand dollars an hour. Now, that up there was a freebie since he's doing us a favor. But I wouldn't be surprised if he sends some sort of present as a thank you. That's the kind of sweetheart he is."

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We made it back to my car and headed back to the office. Even though it was only a twenty-minute drive, we were drenched in sweat by the time we made it back to the Scottsdale Road exit off the Loop-202 freeway.

When I saw the In-and-Out Burger, I pulled into it, partially because it was lunchtime and partially because I needed to cool off. From the moans of relief Suzie and Sophie made when we stepped into the air-conditioned restaurant, they were also happy I'd stopped.

"I hate to tell you," Sophie said, "but your car sucks. I'm thinking we should take my car next time, even if we have to sit on each other's laps. It isn't roomy, but at least the AC works."

"I'd even settle for taking two cars," Suzie said. "I'm sorry, Laura, but it's August in Arizona. A working air conditioner in the car would probably be a good idea."

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After lunch, we drove the final ten minutes up to the office. Suzie took off, but promised to call us the moment she knew anything. Sophie and I sat in the reception area and cooled down. Amber was filing some papers in a file cabinet in our records room.

The door to Lenny's office was open, so I knocked on the frame and went in. Lenny was sitting at his desk with several stacks of paper in front of him. A lit cigarette was sitting in the ashtray. He motioned me to one of the short wooden chairs.

"Where are the police on finding Johnny?" I asked.

"They're still going through the standard missing person protocols. So far, they've searched through his financials and phone records. They've found nothing unusual in the financials. His credit cards haven't been used and his phone hasn't been turned on since the morning of the disappearance. A detective went through Johnny's residence yesterday and apparently found nothing of note. They're putting together a nice file on him, same as us, but they have no leads as to where he might be. What have you and Sophie found out?"

"Johnny has several long-term accounts in banks and brokerage houses all over the world. There's about seventeen million dollars in them. He also has a new account in the Cayman Islands. This new account's been getting deposits of roughly twenty thousand dollars a week from someone who went to a lot of trouble to hide the fact they'd made the payments. I think they could be the key to finding out what's going on."

Lenny picked up the cigarette and puffed on it. I waited patiently while he sat in silence.

"Alright," he said. "If I understand you correctly, you're saying DiCenzo's man is wealthy and is getting secretive payments from somewhere. Granted, it sounds suspicious, but these payments could be from anybody. Like maybe he has a side business. Maybe he's shaking somebody down. He could be blackmailing a wealthy man to keep quiet about something. It could even be a kickback from a contractor on a job he helped arrange. Right now, it could be anything. Correct?"

I nodded my head. "You're right, it could be anything."

"So, until you can find out more about them, the payments are a non-factor. What's more important, as of right now, is that you have no idea where he is or if he's even still alive."

Again, I nodded my head.

Lenny finished the cigarette and thought for a moment longer. "I can't do anything with this yet. It's still too vague. I need you and Sophie to dig deeper. What about Mistress McNasty's contact at the bank? Will he be able to do anything for us?"

"Suzie's contact was pretty high up and he promised to help. Hopefully we'll get more information on the payments soon."

"Okay, what do you have on the truck company? Any idea who's starting the fires?"

"Not yet. I'm still looking into the key people who are working there and a guy who's a driver for Southwest."

"Did I hear you've gone undercover to work at Southwest Desert? I like the effort, but don't you think that's a bit much?"

"Maybe. I didn't plan it that way, but I'm learning a lot about the company. So far they don't seem like nice people."

"And that's all you have so far?"

"Yes, so far."

"Fine, come back to me when you have some good news."

I walked back out to reception. Sophie saw me and shook her head. She picked up a paper from her desk and by mutual agreement, we both walked back to the break room. I grabbed two Diet Pepsis from the fridge and handed one to Sophie.

"I heard the whole thing," she said. "Lenny's in a bitchy mood today."

"Yes, but that doesn't mean he's wrong. I don't have anything so far."

Sophie held up the paper. "Here's the quick report on Lew Lockridge. He seems like a jerk. He's been arrested on simple assault, aggravated assault, and armed robbery. He spent three years in Florence and another two years on parole. He's been working at Southwest Desert since they opened for business, about a year ago. He must make a good income there because his credit has steadily been going up."

"Um, I hate to ask."

"Okay, I know. I'll punch him into the secret software. Maybe the government won't mind if we use their computers to look up secret

information on someone new. But if I disappear, I hope it weighs on your conscience.”

My phone rang and I saw it was Suzie.

“Jules got the information you’re looking for,” she said when I answered. “He didn’t want to send an email, so he called me and I wrote everything down.”

“Wow, that was fast,” I said. “I’m still in the office. Let me put you on speakerphone and you can download the data to Sophie.”

We walked back to reception and I set the phone on Sophie’s desk. Suzie spent almost five minutes reading off routing numbers, wire transfer numbers, and account numbers. It made no sense to me, but Sophie kept nodding her head as she typed the numbers into the secret software.

“Thanks,” Sophie said when Suzie was finished. “That looks like a complete path from where the money started to when it was deposited into Johnny’s account in the Caymans. According to the information, the money went through three intermediate banks before it hit Hohokam National. We’ll let the software work on it for a while and hopefully we’ll see who actually sent it.”

I went back to my cubicle and called Max. I asked if we could meet and share with each other what we’d found out about Johnny.

“I’m at the offices at the Tropical Paradise,” he said. “Give me a call when you get closer and I’ll meet you down at the Headhunter Lounge.”

Chapter Seven

The Scottsdale Tropical Paradise Resort is not only one of the nicest golf resorts in Arizona it's also the corporate headquarters of Scottsdale Land & Resort Management, Inc. It's a company that controls about a quarter of the top resorts in Scottsdale. It also happens to be run by Tough Tony DiCenzo.

I called Max after I drove through the main entrance and told him I was about five minutes out from the bar. I parked down in visitor's parking and walked up to the main entrance. After walking through the lobby, which was set up to look like a tropical island in the South Pacific, I came to the Headhunter Lounge. I told the hostess I was waiting for someone and I'd walk around the lounge until he got there.

Like something you'd expect to see in a theme park, the Headhunter is a tropical rainforest bar that features an expedition camp of jungle scientists on one side of the bar and a village of headhunting natives on the other. Although the scientists' camp remained, nothing could be seen of them except for a big pot of stew, bubbling over a fire in the native village. A pile of shoes and a scientist's hat were laying on the ground, suspiciously near the cooking pot.

I sat at a table that was positioned next to the scientists' tent. Within a minute, Max came into the bar and I waved him over. I stood and was delighted when he took me into his arms for a brief, but wonderful, hug.

We sat and a waitress came over. Max ordered each of us a Macallan Cask Strength scotch with a single ice cube. When she brought them to the table, we each spent a few minutes sipping our scotch and relaxing in each other's company. I could have easily stayed like this all afternoon but at last Max spoke.

"You wanted to talk about what we've found out about Johnny?"

"Yeah," I said. "You first. What have you gotten so far?"

"As you know, Johnny hasn't been seen since late on Sunday night. According to his phone and credit card records, he dropped out of sight sometime Monday morning. That would be right before he was due to have a date with his girlfriend, Suzie, correct?"

“Right, her name’s Suzie Lu.”

“We’ve hired a local Scottsdale firm to help us search. We have access to his phone records and his credit cards, but at this point, there haven’t been hits on either. We also haven’t found anything unusual in his financials.”

“Johnny either left voluntarily or was taken under threat or force,” I said. “If he left on his own, he probably spent some time planning it and it’ll be tough to find him. If he was taken by someone unfriendly, I’d assume you’d somehow hear about it through them.”

“So far, no one’s contacted us demanding a ransom or claiming credit for his disappearance. If they did, at least we’d know what we’re dealing with. The third possibility is he’s already in a hole somewhere in the desert. It’s that possibility that’s been keeping me up at night.”

“It sounds like you’re doing the right things,” I said.

“I’m not sure what else we can do. We have everyone searching the city, but that hasn’t yielded any results. We haven’t looked into Johnny’s girlfriend. You said you’re working with her. What’s she like? Do you think she has anything to do with his disappearance?”

“I don’t think she’s involved. She’s as worried as you are and she’s spending a nice chunk of money to retain Lenny’s help getting him back. The police are also monitoring Johnny’s phone and credit cards. They have a notice out to all of the hospitals in the area in case he comes into one of those. They went through Johnny’s house, but they didn’t find anything. I assume you had already gone through it and cleaned it up?”

“Yes, we removed the guns and the toys from the bedroom.”

Why did he have to mention that? I wonder if the toys are at his house?

“There’s one thing,” I said. “Over the past few months, have there been any leaks in your organization? Not just the simple things that your enemies could have guessed. I mean serious and obvious leaks?”

Max looked at me for several seconds without speaking. I wasn’t sure how to read that look. It made me realize there was a lot about him I still needed to learn.

“Yes,” he finally said. “I’m not sure how you discovered this, but Tony and I both have concerns about leaks. I can’t tell you everything, but some

information about our business has been getting out and it seems to be coming from the inside. We're convinced the events that occurred at Danica and Alex's wedding could only have happened with inside information, perhaps even with inside help. I think Tony has some suspicions about who it is, but he said he wanted to investigate more before he voiced any opinion. As part of this, he promoted Sal Monza to the internal security position. In addition to keeping Carlos' men from coming into our group, Sal's there primarily to help us find out about the snitch."

"Do you have any concerns it may be Johnny?"

Max look at me like I'd just said something stupid.

"No. No concerns at all. Johnny's been with Tony from the beginning. Tony literally entrusts his life to Johnny on a daily basis. He's no more the leak than I am. What makes you say that?"

"Well, from what I understand, Johnny spent years being Tony's personal bodyguard. Now he's only Tony's driver. Do you think Johnny would have seen that as a demotion? Could that have caused a rift between Johnny and Tony?"

"I know Johnny fairly well. I believe he enjoys his position within the organization. Johnny's always in the thick of things, but isn't forced to make the decisions. It's a role he seems comfortable with. Plus, Johnny and Tony go way back and I believe they genuinely like each other's company. When they're together, they've always struck me more as two brothers rather than two co-workers."

"Okay, um, there's one other thing," I said. "We have access to some search software and some bank information your investigation firm may not have. While researching Johnny's financials we've come across some, um, unusual transactions. It's something your guys would have probably missed."

"Transactions? As in payments? Do you think Johnny's getting payments from somebody? The other side perhaps?"

"I didn't say they were payments and I didn't say they were from the other side. Just transactions. We're still looking into it. It's possible there's an innocent explanation for everything."

"Alright. Is that as far as you'll voice your suspicions?"

“For now, yes. And don’t even call them suspicions. Right now, all I have are some unusual things I’m trying to piece together. As we learn more, I’ll tell you what we find out.”

I could see Max wanted to know more, but he didn’t press.

“Alright. I understand you not wanting to accuse anyone falsely. As you find out more, keep me informed.”

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I walked out to the parking lot and got to my car. Even though I’d parked in the shade of a cluster of fan palms, when I opened the door, I felt the familiar *whoosh* of hot air rolling out. It was the same blast of heat you get when you open the door of a hot oven. I opened the doors, rolled down the windows, and let the car air-out for a minute before I settled in.

On the warm drive back down to the office, I called Sophie and made sure she still had time for dinner. She said both she and Gina would be there. I reminded her again not to talk about work or the law office. I then called Danielle, who said she’d be done with work in a few minutes and she’d meet us at Old Town Gringos at about six o’clock.

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I parked on Craftsman Court about half a block down from Old Town Gringos. For years, it had been called Dos Gringos, but they recently had a name change; typical for Scottsdale. It’s a fun Baja restaurant where we usually end up when we want to unwind and eat simple but good food. Most of the tables are outside on a patio under big umbrellas and strings of multicolored lights.

Sophie and Gina were already at a table in the front by the street, four margaritas were lined up in front of them. We generally liked sitting by the street and watching the guys that strolled down the sidewalk or slowly drove by in their convertibles. From the back of the restaurant, I saw Danielle winding her way through the lively crowd. She saw me and came up to the table. I introduced her to both Sophie and Gina.

A waitress came by and handed out menus. When she left, Sophie turned to Danielle, “Welcome to our little group.”

“Thanks,” Danielle said. “It’s nice to get out. I’ve only been in Scottsdale a few months and I don’t often go anywhere.”

When Sophie heard Danielle's accent, she asked her a question in Spanish. When Danielle replied in kind, Sophie grinned and asked something about Guadalajara. Danielle nodded and started chatting with her in rapid-fire Spanish. Gina and I looked at each other as they went on for three or four minutes. Finally, Sophie looked over at us and laughed.

"Sorry," she said. "It feels great to talk to someone from Jalisco. My parents came from there and the Jalisco way of speaking is all I heard at home growing up. I sort of picked up their accent and I can spot it a mile away.

"I was born further south," Danielle said, "but I've spent most of my life living in little towns all over Jalisco." She looked over at me. "Jalisco's a state on the Pacific-side of the country, about halfway down. It's green with mountains, rivers, and waterfalls everywhere. Puerto Vallarta is the big resort town there on the Pacific."

"It sounds beautiful," Gina said. "I've only been down to Rocky Point and there's nothing green about that at all. It's the driest desert I've ever been to and I've lived in Arizona my entire life."

"You can't judge all of Mexico by Sonora," Danielle said. "Lots of places in Mexico are temperate or even wet. Think tropical rainforest kind of wet."

Danielle looked over the menu while everyone talked. After a minute, the waitress came by and we ordered our dinners.

"How do you all know each other?" Danielle asked.

"Well," Sophie said, "I've known Laura ever since my divorce. Gina and I work in the same crappy office down the street. We all end up here every week or two. Been doing it for a couple of years now. How did you end up here?"

"I'd been working in the company's corporate offices in Zapopan, outside of Guadalajara. I heard about the Scottsdale office manager position through the company job board and thought I needed a change. I moved up here a few months ago."

"How do you like it?" Gina asked.

"I love Scottsdale. It's beautiful and everyone seems to have a lot of money. Although I don't think I'm going to be able to afford any of the houses here by working in an office at a trucking company."

“Here’s to working in an office and living in a crappy apartment,” Sophie said and lifted her glass. We all lifted our glasses and clinked them together.

The food came out and we all dug in, still laughing and talking. It was nice to be out and forget about work for a little while. After about ten minutes of eating, Sophie looked at Danielle and then at me. Her eyes went back to Danielle and back to me.

“What?” I asked.

“I just noticed it,” she said. “The two of you look exactly alike. The hair’s a different color but in a dim room you’d both look identical.”

“I noticed it as well,” Gina said. “You’re both the same height and have the same build. You both have the same shape of face and the same hairstyle. You both even have the same way of swinging your hair when you walk.”

Danielle and I looked at each other for a moment, then she held up her glass. “To long lost sisters,” I said.

We all laughed and clinked our glasses together.

As we were finishing, Danielle got up to go to the bathroom. I looked at her as she walked away, but I didn’t notice any unusual hair swinging. As soon as Danielle was out of earshot, Gina bent over and started speaking in a low tone.

“Laura, next time you get up, look over at the two guys at the green table next to the wall. Do you know either of them?”

“Okay,” I said. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s probably nothing,” Gina said. “But they’ve been drinking nothing but soda and they keep glancing this way. There’s a guy at the bar who hasn’t touched his coffee for the last ten minutes and he keeps looking this way, too.”

“Are you still being followed?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Why would Tony still be following me? My position with his group has gone down to occasional consultant.”

“Maybe Max is worried about you?” Sophie asked. “Maybe this is his way of making sure nothing happens to you.”

“I don’t think so and honestly I’ll be kinda pissed if he’s having me followed. I don’t need a babysitter.”

Sophie glanced in the direction of the men. “At least these two are cuter than the ones who normally follow you.”

“I’d still ask Max about it next time you see him,” Gina said. “If people are following you and it isn’t Tony, we could have bigger issues.”

Danielle came back to the table and we finished our dinners.

“What are you doing tonight?” I asked Sophie.

“Got a date. I’ll need to go home and change after we’re done.”

“Snake again?” I asked.

“Snake?” Danielle asked. “You’re dating someone named Snake?”

“He plays football for the Cardinals,” Sophie said. “But no, after our last date he got a fine for breaking curfew. I didn’t realize the football camp was up in Flagstaff. By the time he got back, it was like two in the morning and he got yelled at and fined. I won’t be able to see him again until the team comes back down to Phoenix and that won’t be for another two weeks.”

“So, who’s the date with tonight?”

“Um, Milo.”

I saw Gina roll her eyes and heard her exasperated sigh.

“Who’s Milo?” Danielle asked.

“He’s a guy I’ve been seeing who sort of has a shady job,” Sophie said. “Gina doesn’t approve of him.”

“Milo wants to get serious, but Sophie isn’t ready for that,” I said. “Well, at least not with him.”

“Well, good luck with that,” Danielle said. “One of the reasons I came up here was I had gotten myself closely involved with two men at the same time down in Mexico. They both wanted to marry me and I liked them both. So instead of choosing, I moved to Scottsdale.”

“Nice. That was a great way of getting out of it,” Sophie said. “Laura, maybe you should move to Mexico.”

“Shut up,” I said. But even as I said it, I wondered if moving would be a good way out of my situation.

We paid the bill and stood up to leave. I glanced around and saw the men Gina had asked about, but I didn’t recognize them. If Max or Tony had sent them, they were new faces to me.

We stood in a group while we said our good-byes. Danielle was smiling as she gave each of us a hug.

“It was fun tonight,” she said. “I’d love to join in again sometime soon.”

“Of course,” Gina said. “You’re welcome anytime.”

Sophie started talking in Spanish again and all I made out were the words *Scottsdale cougars* and *nightclubs*.

I told Danielle I’d see her at the office on Monday morning. She then went out through the back of the restaurant while Gina, Sophie, and I went out through the front. We walked down to my car then stopped.

“Did you recognize any of the guys?” Gina asked.

“No, but I don’t know everyone in Tony’s organization.”

“Are you still going over to Southwest Desert tonight to look into the shipment you told us about?”

“Yes. You didn’t see the guys there or hear how they were talking. It could be something pretty big.”

“Do you think it fits in with our client?”

“I don’t know yet, but it definitely could.”

“Well, be careful,” Gina said. “Remember, we aren’t the police and investigating criminal activity that doesn’t affect our client is outside of our scope. The people who work there sound pretty serious. My advice is to find out what you can, but don’t get too close to the buildings. Stay outside the fence line if you can.”

Gina headed off to the gym and Sophie went home to get ready for her date with Milo. I went back to my place to see if I could get in a quick nap before I headed out on my nighttime adventure.

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I got to my apartment house and took the elevator up to my floor. When the doors opened, there was an older man waiting to take the elevator down. He had a smudge of red lipstick on his cheek. I walked down the hall and knocked on Grandma's door. When she opened the door, I saw she was dressed for a date and there were a couple of Diet Pepsi cans on the coffee table. Marlowe was sound asleep on his chair.

"Hello, Laura," Grandma said. "Come on in. Would you like a Diet Pepsi?"

"No thanks. I'm going out later tonight and want to catch a quick nap first. Was that Ray I saw in the hall?"

"I suppose so; he just left. We spent the afternoon at Casino Arizona. I won a hundred bucks playing the slots."

"That's great," I said. "I always seem to lose."

"After that we came back here and watched TV for a while. I think he was hoping for some tail, but I didn't want him to think I was a pushover. I told him I wasn't trying to be a flat tire, but I have a rule of no sex until the third date."

"That seems reasonable to me."

"I can't say I completely behaved myself. His pictures had me curious to see if he needed a blue pill to get that big. While we were watching TV, I spent a few minutes feeling around down there."

"Well?"

"He doesn't seem to have a problem with that at all. For our next date I might have to bring him over here and cook him dinner. I think after a bottle of wine or two we'll both be in the mood for some action."

"That sounds promising. When are you going to see him again?"

"Well, I'm seeing Grandpa Bob tomorrow, so I told Ray I couldn't see him until Sunday."

"Are you going to call it off with Grandpa Bob?"

"I'm not sure. We get along pretty good. Maybe I'll only need to tell him I'm not ready to get serious with anyone and need to be able to do my own thing for a while."

“Okay, let me know how it all works out.”

I went over to my apartment and dressed in a comfortable T-shirt. I assumed it would take me a while to go to sleep, but within five minutes, I was out.

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I'd set the alarm for two o'clock. When it went off, I slowly came swimming back to life. I stumbled out of bed and pulled on a pair of charcoal-gray capris, a navy-blue V-neck top, and a dark Arizona Diamondbacks baseball hat. My goal was to blend in with the shadows, but not to look too conspicuous in case I was spotted.

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I parked on the same side street as before, about a block and a half from Southwest Desert Transport. There was a thin crescent of a moon in the sky, but I mainly relied on the glow from the lights of the surrounding city as I made my way to the cluster of dark buildings. The temperature was still in the nineties even though it was almost three in the morning.

I stood on the road and looked through the fence to the warehouse and loading docks. Five of the bays held semi-trailers, but from this distance, it was hard to make out any of the details. I couldn't read the serial numbers on the trailers and I didn't know which one was mine.

I walked down the street to the parking lot entrance. The main gate was still open and I didn't see a security guard.

Ignoring Gina's advice, I walked across the parking lot and made my way to the loading docks on the far side of the warehouse building. Out of habit, I kept to the shadows and close to the buildings.

The faint glow from the lights in the parking lot allowed me to read the numbers on each of the trailers without using my penlight. On the second one, I found what I'd been looking for. Written on the side was serial number DL4358. There was nothing remarkable about it from the outside. It was bright yellow with a large red arrow pointing towards the front. A huge red diesel tractor was attached to the trailer, but it was shut off and there didn't appear to be anyone in the cab.

I spent several minutes walking around the truck looking for anything unusual but found nothing.

*This isn't getting me anywhere.*

Next to the farthest loading bay was a set of five or six metal steps leading up to a covered concrete patio. In the wall in the back of the patio was a dented metal door.

*This is probably a bad idea.*

I walked down the row of loading docks and carefully climbed the stairs, all the time listening for voices. The patio was apparently the smoking area for the graveyard shift. Two folding chairs had been placed on either side of a rusted metal drum. On top of the drum was a coffee can, half-full of cigarette butts. I smiled when I saw the door to the inside had been propped open with a brick. A pale-yellow glow from inside the warehouse spilled out onto the landing.

I went to the door and again listened for sounds of anyone working inside. I started thinking up excuses in case I was met by a dockworker. When I didn't hear anything, I took a deep breath, and stepped in.

I had chosen three o'clock because I figured this would be about the time when the midnight shift would be at lunch. I wasn't sure if I had guessed right, but no one was visible in the loading area. I counted down the bay doors and found my trailer. A forklift and several loaded pallets were lined up near the open trailer doors. A bright light on a movable arm was pointed into the shiny metal box, showing it was a little over three-quarters full.

Looking at the load inside the trailer, I didn't see anything unusual. It was the standard merchandise you'd see at any of the big box superstores. There was an assortment of paper towels, paints, copier paper, charcoal lighter fluid, beach towels, plastic lawn chairs, and boxed breakfast cereal, all tightly wrapped with clear stretch wrap. Some of the pallets were stacked higher, some were lower, and there was about a foot of clearance between each one.

I again listened for the sound of voices, but heard nothing. Telling myself this also was probably a bad idea, I slipped into the trailer.

*I hope that everyone stays at lunch a few minutes longer.*

A quick glance confirmed the pallets near the doors contained things that would go to almost any grocery or hardware store. I knew anything worth

seeing would be hidden. I slithered my way over and around the boxes until I made it to the front of the trailer.

Four of the pallets there weren't like the others. These each contained several large unmarked cardboard boxes. There wasn't any stretch wrap on the outside and they were only sealed with strips of clear plastic tape.

A couple of tugs were enough for me to open the lid on the top box on the first pallet. Inside were several long heavy bundles, each wrapped in a blue bath towel. Picking up and unwrapping one of these, I found a heavy black assault rifle. The wording on the rifle was in English. I wasn't sure what kind it was; Gina would probably know. It definitely looked military and from the size of the boxes, there must have been close to a hundred assault rifles wrapped up in the towels.

*Oh, shit.*

With my heart pounding, I ripped off the tape and opened the top box on the second pallet. Inside were several smaller wooden boxes each banded with two wire straps. Stenciled on the top of each box was *1680 CRTG 5.56MM 4 BALL M855 1 TRACER M856*. I tried to lift one of the boxes, but it must have weighed forty or fifty pounds. I had enough experience with guns to realize these boxes were full of bullets. A lot of bullets.

The third pallet again contained several wire banded wooden crates. These also looked military and these were stenciled with *GRENADE M67 HE FRAG*. I wasn't sure what all of the lettering and numbers meant, but the word *grenade* left little doubt what was in the boxes.

*Shit. There's enough here to start a small war.*

I knew I was pushing my luck. I decided not to chance getting caught by looking into the rest of the boxes.

I began to work my way to the opening in the back. I stopped when I heard the sound of men shouting and laughing with each other. They were somewhere further back in the building, but the laughing was getting louder. I didn't think anyone knew I was in the building, but I would need to wait until the men went away before I could leave. I hid myself behind one of the taller stacks of boxes and stood very still.

As the sound of the men grew closer, one voice kept rising above the others. He was shouting orders and the men were talking and laughing. The

talking grew louder as the group of men paused on the dock, seemingly just outside the trailer. My heart seemed to stop when I heard two or three men enter the trailer and drop something heavy on the floor in the open space near the doors. They walked back out, but I could still hear them on the loading dock, talking and laughing.

Keeping still so I wouldn't be detected, I waited to see what would happen next. I was hoping they wouldn't decide to finish loading the truck. If I stayed where I was, I'd be crushed as soon as they shoved the next pallet in. After five long minutes, I felt a sense of relief as the voices faded back into the warehouse.

*That had been too close. What was I thinking coming in here?*

I slowly got up from my hiding place. I had overstayed my welcome and I needed to make a quick quiet exit before the men came back. I again made an effort to think up a cover story in case I was discovered. No one in the warehouse knew I worked in the office. Perhaps I was an angry girlfriend looking for my cheating boyfriend. Maybe I had recently caught him with the slutty next-door neighbor. It was three thirty in the morning and he said he'd be at work, but I suspected he was shacked up with his new girlfriend. It would be understandable if I'd wandered into the wrong building looking for him. After all, I was angry and hurt. In fact, I was nearly hysterical.

I knew I could pull it off. I'd used variations of the same story before and it always seemed to amuse the men. Sometimes I even got sympathy and offers for dates.

I froze in panic when I heard someone moving around on the loading dock very close to where I was hiding. There was a loud squeaky metallic noise. It took me a second to place the sound, but then I knew someone was moving the portable light. The shadows surrounding me swung wildly as the light was pulled out of the trailer, then it became very dark.

*Shit.*

My heart pounded and again my breathing stopped. I'd already left my hiding place and was standing in the open. If someone walked in the trailer, they couldn't help but find me. I also knew my story about being an angry girlfriend wasn't going to be nearly enough to keep me from being in serious trouble.

*Stay calm. Wait for him to leave. Then you can escape.*

Things quieted down again, so I started to relax. I'd give it another minute or two, then calmly walk out of the trailer. I'd casually go through the warehouse and leave through the same door I'd used to enter. I was glad I already had a good cover story. Now that there was activity in the building, chances were good that someone would spot me.

I jumped as a grinding metallic sound vibrated through the trailer. At first, I couldn't identify it, then everything fell into place and I became filled with terror. The sound came from the doors of the trailer, as they were being swung shut. My entire body became rigid with fright. I was close to panic as I heard the slam of the first door then the second. My heart sank further as I heard the latch swing into place and heard the distinctive clanking sound of a lock being attached.

*Damn, damn, damn.*

It became eerily quiet in the dark trailer as the sounds from the loading dock faded. I stood up and used my penlight to look around. My hand was shaking so badly I dropped my flashlight twice. I climbed over the last three pallets to get to the doors. As I walked to the back, I stumbled over something on the floor. I fell and about half the contents of my purse dumped out. I scooped everything back in and put the strap over my head to hold it against my side. I swung the penlight around to see what had caused me to trip.

On the floor was a big bundle wrapped in a black plastic tarp. The bundle was sealed with strips of silver duct tape.

*Shit. No. Not now.*

I squatted down, ripped off several strips of tape, and pulled back the tarp. As I did, I looked into the smashed and mangled face of a dead man.

Bright spots danced in front of my face and my stomach gave an involuntary twist. Dead bodies usually don't affect me like this, but being trapped inside a locked box already had me on edge. I felt my dinner trying to come up and it was only through force of will I was able to keep it down. I dropped to a knee and made a purposeful effort to maintain control.

I stayed down for several minutes until the nausea began to subside. I had just gotten my heart rate below one-twenty when I felt the trailer rock and

heard the unmistakable sounds of the diesel tractor firing up. The trailer softly vibrated for almost a minute, then with a lurch, it started moving. I sat down hard next to the dead guy to keep from pitching over.

For the next fifteen minutes, I sat and tried to calm myself. I needed to find a way out of this prison before anyone found out I was inside. With a flash of inspiration, I pulled the phone out of my back pocket. Being inside a metal box seemed to knock the signal down a bit, but it was still working.

From the map application, I could see I was heading south through the city. I thought about calling the police, but decided against it. I'd been trespassing and probably breaking a few other laws. Plus, the dead body would put me in the center of a murder investigation, which would be awkward for Lenny and likely dangerous for me. I thought about calling Reno, but that was an even worse idea. Instead, I called Gina. She answered on the second ring and immediately sounded alert.

"Gina, I'm locked in a semi-trailer heading into the desert. It's bright yellow with a red arrow on the side and it's being pulled by a big red cab. There's a dead guy in here along with enough guns and military weapons to start a war. I'm going south on Arizona 87, you know, Country Club Drive, but way south of the city, like into the desert south of the San Tan Mountains. We just passed the road to Sacaton and are coming up to Arizona 187. It wouldn't make sense to take this road unless we're stopping somewhere in the desert around here. I won't be able to talk a lot longer. My battery's good, but the signal's fading. I'm already down to one bar."

"We should call the police. It sounds like you've stumbled into something pretty big."

"No, we can't call the police until we know more about this. I'm not exactly in here legally and once we call the police they'll find out about the guns and the dead guy and we'll be in the middle of everything. Since everything will eventually be a public record, the killers will be able to trace the police involvement back to Lenny and maybe to our client. I don't want that. I'm okay for the moment. Plus, for all we know the guns and the dead guy have something to do with Tony DiCenzo. I definitely don't want to get in the middle of that."

"I don't agree with you, but okay. Get out any way you can. Don't worry about being delicate in there. If whoever belongs to those guns finds you,

they won't be amused. You say they've killed once. They probably won't hesitate to kill you as well. Do you have your gun with you? I'm not saying to have a shootout, but don't hesitate to defend yourself. Sophie and I'll come down and find you."

"I will. Gina? Can you hear me? Hello?"

I looked, but the phone had no signal.

*Damn.*

~~~~~

Fifteen minutes later, the truck rolled to a stop. The last five minutes had been very bumpy, as though going over a dirt road. For another five minutes, the trailer softly vibrated as the truck idled. I had my Baby Glock in my hand and was mentally going over scenarios while I waited for the trailer doors to open.

Ten minutes later, the big diesel shut off and the trailer became silent. I could hear voices outside, but couldn't make out what they were saying.

For the next hour, the voices continued outside the trailer, sometimes nearby sometimes farther away. I kept waiting for someone to open the trailer doors, but it never happened. Instead, I eventually heard several car doors closing, then cars starting up and driving away. For another ten minutes, I listened for the sound of anyone outside the trailer, but there was nothing.

Up to this point, I avoided the dead guy. But he was somehow part of this and I needed to learn as much as possible. I put the penlight between my teeth, pulled back the plastic tarp, and examined him.

He was a big guy, at least six feet tall and muscular. He had short dark-blond hair and I put his age at close to forty. Death had been caused by a gunshot to the face, just below his right eye. This had blown out the back of his head and left his face with a twisted and misshapen appearance. There wasn't any fresh blood. This told me he had been shot a couple of days before and been stored someplace before he was put in the trailer. I went through his pockets, but didn't find an ID or anything useful. Before I put the tarp back into position, I used my phone to take several pictures of his face and body wrapped in black plastic.

I spent the next twenty minutes climbing all through the trailer looking for a way out or for anything that would help me get the doors open. When the results of my search were negative, I finally admitted there was nothing I could do but let Gina find me. I sat with my back against the side of the trailer and waited.

Chapter Eight

By eleven o'clock, the sun had been up for almost five hours and it was starting to get hot and stuffy in the trailer. Unfortunately, I knew it would get a lot hotter as the day went on. Worse than the heat was the fact that the dead guy was starting to smell. It was the rancid stench of a dead animal on the side of the road. With the rising heat, the smell of decay was only going to get worse.

I knew Sophie and Gina were driving around looking for me, but I was starting to get discouraged. Gina was good, but I was in a very small truck in a very big desert. My last known position was on Arizona 87 about ten miles southwest of Queen Creek. After that, we had driven another fifteen minutes. Assuming we continued more or less south-east, that would put me somewhere in the deep desert, fifteen or twenty miles northeast of Casa Grande. We had driven several miles down a dirt road, so the trailer most likely wasn't going to be visible from a main highway.

For about the fifth time, I climbed on top of the boxes and held my phone against the top of the trailer. Sometimes I briefly got a signal, but just as quickly, I lost it. I thought a text might have a better chance of getting through. I estimated where I was and attempted to send messages to Gina. Each time I received a reply that my text had failed to send.

Okay, so assume Gina won't come to rescue you. What are you going to do?

First things first. My penlight wouldn't last forever. I needed light and I needed some air. I had my Baby Glock and that would serve for both. Unfortunately, if anyone were nearby, the gunshots would alert them to my presence. I hadn't heard anything other than the sounds of the desert outside of my little prison, but you never know.

I fired two rounds in each side of the trailer and a couple in the roof. In the enclosed space, the sound was intense and my ears immediately began to ring. For my efforts, I was rewarded as light came in through the holes on the left side of the trailer and from the holes in the roof. It wasn't a lot, but after being in total darkness for several hours, the holes seemed like spotlights. Standing next to the holes, I could feel a faint movement of air. I

suspected it wouldn't be enough to keep the trailer from turning into an oven, but it was a start. I held my phone up to one of the holes to see if I could get a signal, but I was still out of range.

I waited a full fifteen minutes, listening to hear if anyone would come to the trailer to learn what was happening inside. I still had several rounds in the magazine. Not enough for a prolonged standoff, but enough to make a statement if anyone tried to open the doors and come at me. Fortunately, no one did.

Once again, I climbed over the pallets to see what else I had to work with. About halfway back, I found a case of iced tea buried in the middle of a pallet.

Raspberry, my favorite.

I dug through my purse and found a pair of nail clippers. I used the small nail-file blade to rip through the layers of shrink-wrapping. I then broke open the case of tea and downed half a bottle. It was warm but tasted delicious.

I then climbed back to the boxes with the military supplies. In theory, I could use a grenade to blow open the doors to the trailer but I wasn't so sure I could survive being inside an enclosed space with explosives going off. That left the rifles. Even if I couldn't use them to open the doors, a military assault rifle would give me a better chance against the bad guys than my half-empty Baby Glock.

I pulled one out of the box and looked at it. It seemed simple enough. There was a switch above the trigger labeled with *SAFE*, *SEMI*, *BURST*, and *AUTO*. The rifle didn't come with any bullets in it, but I knew where there were several thousand of them.

I opened the cardboard box on the pallet containing the ammunition and looked at the wooden crates inside. They were each banded with two wire straps. Unfortunately, I didn't have anything to cut the bands.

I went to the last pallet and ripped the tape off the top box. I was hoping for a pair of wire cutters. Instead, the box contained military camouflage uniforms, boots, hats, and belts. I dug down through the box and smiled when I found a pair of military shooter's earmuffs along with some protective eyewear.

Why couldn't I have found these ten minutes ago?

As I looked around for something to pry the bands off, I realized the barrel of my rifle might work. I picked a crate in the middle of the stack of ammunition. It was held solidly in place by the other crates and was unlikely to move. I shoved the barrel between the crate and the wire band then twisted and pulled on the rifle. I finally had to press down with all my weight on the butt of the rifle until the band broke. I then repeated the operation with the second metal band. It took me three tries, but it eventually broke, as well.

I again used my rifle as a pry bar and shoved unopened crates of ammunition onto the floor until I got to my open crate in the middle of the pile. Panting with the effort, I pulled open the lid. Inside were two green metal boxes. I opened one of these and found it contained about two dozen curved metal clips, each loaded with about thirty bullets.

I picked up my rifle and examined it. It didn't look damaged, but with another hundred to choose from, I wasn't going to take a chance that I had bent the barrel. I went to the box and pulled out another towel wrapped rifle from the pile.

I put the earmuffs on my head and adjusted them. My ears were still ringing, but I was hoping they wouldn't get a lot worse. I put on the safety glasses and those seemed to fit as well. I grabbed six or seven of the full ammunition clips and used the front of my shirt to hold them as I headed to the doors at the back of the trailer.

I pushed the first clip into the rifle and pulled back the bolt to load a round into the chamber. I'd seen them do this in movies and it seemed to work. I flipped the switch from *SAFE* to *SEMI*, aimed at a point on the door above where I thought the latch should be, and pulled the trigger twice. Each time, a shot rang out, much louder than with my Baby Glock. Two spent casings were ejected from the rifle and I heard them bounce on the floor. I walked over to the door and two small holes had appeared where I had aimed. I took this as a good sign.

I stepped back a few feet and set the switch to *BURST*. This time when I pulled the trigger, three shots rapidly rang out. With the last bullet, a bright red line appeared where the bullet had gone. I had seen enough war movies

to know this was a tracer round, which would make the path of the bullet visible.

I still had a mostly full clip so I flipped the switch to *AUTO*. I again aimed at the door, slightly above where I thought the latch was, and pulled the trigger. The noise of twenty or so bullets firing at once was painful, even with the earmuffs. Just before the clip ran out, there was a *zing* sound and a red tracer round whizzed past my head.

Shit. I'll need to get behind a pallet if I'm going to do this.

When I looked at the door, I saw that only some of the bullets had gone where I had aimed. Others had traveled up the side of the door as the rifle bounced around in my hands. I climbed behind the pallet nearest the door, ejected the first clip, and shoved another one in. Using the top box on the pile to brace the rifle, I shot the entire clip of bullets at the door. I found I could use the tracer rounds to help keep me aimed in the right place. This time, a ragged grouping of holes appeared where I was aiming. Encouraged, I put in another clip and sent the bullets flying into the door.

Shooting at the door reminded me of a game I once played at a carnival as a kid. I had an air-powered gun with a hundred BB's and I had to shoot a red star out from a piece of paper. If you could completely shoot the star out from the paper, you won a prize. This time if I won, the prize would be my freedom.

When the clip emptied, my ears were ringing loudly and my head was pounding from the noise. A ragged hole the size of an apple had been blasted into the door. I walked over and used the barrel of the rifle to make the hole a little bigger. I could see the top of the latch on the outside of the door but not the lock.

I climbed back over the dead guy, went behind my pallet, and fired another clip into the door. Now the hole had grown to the size of a cantaloupe. This time, I used the butt of the rifle to pry it open another few inches. Now I could see both the latch and the lock.

I had two more clips with me and several thousand more bullets in the back. I was hoping I wouldn't need to shoot all of them to open the door. I shoved the first clip into the rifle and stuck the barrel out the hole. I aimed at the lock and squeezed the trigger. The lock seemed to explode under the force of being hit with thirty bullets fired from a military assault rifle. At

the same time, there was another *zing* sound and my eye caught the movement of another tracer round ricocheting back in my direction.

Damn, that was close.

I shoved my hand through the hole but I couldn't reach out far enough to get a grip on the latch. I stuck the rifle barrel through the hole and used it to try and turn the latch. It was hard to get the right angle and the barrel kept slipping. I tried several more times but it wasn't working.

I stopped when I realized it was suddenly too bright inside the trailer. For some reason, I was also smelling a backyard barbeque.

What?

I looked back to see that the case of charcoal lighter fluid was on fire. Burning liquid was slowly flowing from a hole on the side of the case where the tracer round must have entered. The flames were spreading down the side of the pallet and had already set the boxes next to it on fire.

Damn.

I turned my attention back to the latch. By sticking the rifle barrel out, I could wiggle the latch but I couldn't get it to turn.

I looked back and saw the fire was spreading to a pallet of paint and paper towels. Black smoke was coming from the shrink-wrap and the smell of burning plastic was becoming heavy in the air.

I needed to make the hole bigger to get the latch open. I ejected the empty clip and shoved in the last one. I couldn't get behind my pallet since the fire was right behind it. Instead, I stood next to the door and pointed the rifle down at the door and to the latch beyond. I pulled the trigger and the gun shook as thirty more bullets shot from the rifle. The light from the tracers made it look more like a laser gun than a military rifle.

When the trailer became silent again, I looked down at the door. The sheet metal around the latch was completely shredded. The air in the trailer was thick with the burning plastic smell. My eyes were watering to the point where I was tearing and it was getting harder to see anything. I began to cough as the toxic black smoke filled my lungs.

I used the butt of my rifle to bend away the sharp edges of the metal. I found I now had enough room to stick my arm out to the shoulder. I

grabbed the latch and pushed. With a creaking metallic sound, the latch started to swing around. I got it to move about six inches then it became stuck. I pushed with everything I had, but it wasn't moving.

Damn it!

I pulled my arm back in and grabbed my rifle. I shoved it out the hole and pounded on the latch with the butt of the rifle. After I hit the latch four or five times, it moved about an inch. Another six or seven hits and the door of the trailer popped open.

Yes!

The door made a creaking moaning sound as it swung open. I felt a rush of cool air as I rolled out of the trailer and dropped onto the Sonoran Desert hard-pack. I blinked several times as the bright light of the desert sun hit me. I stood for a moment and breathed in the clean air.

I seemed to be in some sort of junkyard in the middle of the open desert. Old cars, electrical parts, and refrigerators were scattered among piles of scrap metal and rusty construction equipment. Surrounding the junkyard was a high-chain link fence topped with coiled razor wire. I had to wonder who they thought would want to break into this piece-of-shit junkyard in the middle of nowhere.

I looked down and saw my purse was still hanging against my side. This made me feel vaguely comforted. I took off the earmuffs and eyewear, threw them back into the burning trailer, and closed the door. I then made my way through the piles of junk to a sturdy steel gate in the fence. Past the gate was a dirt road that seemed to be the only way in or out. Unfortunately, there was a new padlock and a thick chain securing the gate in place.

I was thinking I'd need to climb the fence when I spotted a place where the fencing had been pulled away from one of the metal posts. I walked over to this small gap and pulled to open it a bit more. I forced myself into the narrow opening and got stuck about halfway through. I was wedged in tightly and had a mild panic attack when I found I couldn't move in or out. Telling myself to stay calm, I sucked in my gut and pushed again. It took six or seven hard pushes, but at last I slithered to the outside. I was panting with the effort, but I was out. I then hurried out to the road.

I needed to get away as fast as I could. I hadn't seen anyone nearby, but that could change at any minute. Unfortunately, the desert was flat in all directions. No matter which direction I ran I would be quickly spotted from several miles away by anyone standing on top of a car or in a truck. The only exception was a small hill located next to the road, four or five hundred yards away from where I was standing. As I looked closer, I saw a rock outcropping and several boulders near the top. It looked like a good place to hide and watch the road without being seen. I ran as fast as my pounding head would allow and eventually made it to my new hiding place.

The sun was high in the sky and temperatures were approaching a hundred and ten. In my hurry to get out, I didn't think to grab another bottle of iced tea. I also didn't have sunscreen or a hat. I normally would have had my sunglasses in my purse, but since it had been two in the morning when I left my apartment, I didn't think I would need them. As a result, my eyes were already burning from the desert glare.

I found a rock about the size of a refrigerator near the top of the hill. It had a smooth side and I sat down with my back against it. I waited for both my breathing and my pounding heart to slow down while I looked down at the road and the junkyard.

Five minutes later, I caught sight of two vehicles coming down the road in my direction. The first was a glossy black sedan and the second was a large black SUV. Dirt and dust from the desert road billowed as they raced past my hill. I imagined the men in the vehicles weren't going to be pleased when they saw what was happening to their trailer.

I watched the vehicles go through the gate and into the junkyard. As the men got out, I heard bits of yelling as they tried to figure out what to do with their unexpected situation. Two of the men opened the back door of the trailer, but that only seemed make the fire grow larger. The other men ran back and forth in the yard, carrying out the orders that were being shouted at them.

I saw something new out of the corner of my eye and looked to the south. My heart sank as I saw a thick line of brown above the flat horizon. Being an Arizona native, I knew this was a Sonoran Desert dust storm.

Some tourists have listed dust storms up there with the plague of locusts and other biblical events. They only happened three or four times a year, but

when they did, the results were never pretty. It only took a minute to see it was heading my way.

Even though it was still twenty miles away, I could see the storm was a monster. It was going to be a solid wall of sand, dust, and dirt slicing through the air at upwards of sixty miles an hour. There was always the chance it would change direction, but with my luck today I knew it would continue to head straight for me.

Shit. Why now?

I'd been caught outside in a dust storm once as a kid. It was a horrible experience and I had no wish to repeat it. Especially not now as I sat fully exposed on a hill with no shelter other than a couple of rocks to hide behind.

I looked back at the junkyard. The fire continued to burn and seemed to be growing. Black smoke and flames were pouring out of the open door. The men had unhooked the red diesel tractor and moved it a safe distance from the burning trailer. I spent almost a minute watching the fire and the rising column of black smoke when there was a sharp cracking noise. It took me a second, but I realized the fire had made it back to the ammunition.

Once the first round went, the others soon followed. It sounded like a string of firecrackers going off. I watched the men scatter and hide behind the piles of junk. This went on for two or three minutes, then there was a loud explosion and the side of the trailer blew out. Sparks and burning debris flew in all directions, then black smoke began to billow from this new hole in the trailer. I could only assume the grenades were going off. As with the bullets, once the first grenade went off, the others followed in a series of loud explosions.

One of the explosions shot a wad of burning material towards the sedan. From the color, it might have been a bundle of burning military uniforms. The burning mass landed under the back end of the sedan and within a minute, smoke and flames were rising from underneath. One of the men ran to the SUV and hurriedly moved it out of the blast zone but there was nothing they could do for the sedan. There was a muffled *woooof* sound as the gas tank blew and turned the sedan into a brightly burning torch. This sent another column of black smoke billowing into the desert sky.

So here I was, dehydrated to the point that I had stopped sweating and was becoming dizzy with the first signs of heatstroke. I was slowly baking to death on a hill in the desert while waiting to get hit by a monster dust storm. The wall of flying sand and dirt now stretched from horizon to horizon. I sat and watched as the wall of brown dust slowly climbed high in the sky above me.

From the back pocket of my pants, I felt my phone vibrating. I had forgotten I still had it with me. Being up on the hill must have boosted the signal. I saw it was Sophie and answered.

“Hey, Sophie,” I said. “What’s up?” I tried to sound like I hadn’t just escaped from being roasted alive, but with my mouth so dry, it was hard to say the words properly.

“Um, you wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with a big column of black smoke rising up from the middle of the desert, would you?”

“Well, sort of.”

I heard Sophie laughing and talking to Gina. “You were right. She’s set something on fire again.”

“Hey,” I croaked into the phone. “Are you maybe going stop laughing and come and get me?”

“Okay, okay,” Sophie said. “Keep your shirt on. Where are you now?”

“Here, I just turned on the *find-my-phone* app. Can you see where I am?”

“Hell, with that black smoke, everyone living in Casa Grande knows where you are. Hold on, the signal’s crap out here. Okay, I’ve got you. We’re four and a half miles northwest of you. We were searching about three miles west of here when we saw the smoke.”

“Do you see the dust storm? It’ll be on me in a few minutes.”

“Hard to miss that one. It looks evil. Where should we pick you up?”

“Get to the road next to where I am. I’m on a hill overlooking the burning semi-trailer. Park at least two miles out from where I am. There are a bunch of pissed off guys at the base of that column of smoke. The desert is flat here, but it will take them a while to spot you at that distance. Once the dust storm hits, you’ll need to meet me on the road at the bottom of the hill. If we time it right, they won’t be able to see either of us.”

“Have you ever been outside in a dust storm? Don’t you think we should try to get you before that shit hits?”

“I can’t. The bad guys are less than half a mile from me. They’ll spot the movement if I come down now. They’re going to be in a bad mood and assume anyone out here had something to do with the fire. They’ll probably start shooting at anyone they see.”

“Okay,” I heard Gina say through Sophie’s speakerphone. “We’ll park, then come get you when the storm gets heavy. Be careful when you get down to the road, visibility will be near zero and driving will be a challenge.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said. “I’d be sad if we ran over you.”

“Keep the phone open in case we need to communicate,” Gina said. “If everything goes well, we’ll have you in about ten minutes.”

As I waited for the storm, I mentally picked my path down the hill to the road. When it hit, I’d be all but blind in the blowing dust and sand. Fortunately, there was a shallow arroyo that would direct me straight down to the road. Even better luck, it didn’t seem to have a lot of cactus in it. On top of everything happening today, I didn’t want to run full speed into a prickly pear, a jumping cholla, or something equally as nasty.

I looked back at the junkyard. Flames were still rising from both the sedan and the trailer. There was the occasional snap of a round popping off or the deeper boom of a grenade blowing up underneath the pile of burning debris.

The sky gradually darkened and I felt drops of rain hitting my skin. The rain quickly became intense and I felt the first of the sand particles stinging against my arm. I looked down the hill and could no longer make out the men.

“Okay,” I yelled into the phone. “I’m coming down now.”

“We’re on the move,” Gina said. “Be careful. We’ll be there in three minutes.”

I left my hiding place and started working my way down the hill. It wasn’t more than two hundred yards down to the road and I covered most of the distance in less than a minute. I easily avoided the saguaro and an ocotillo I spotted earlier from the top of the hill. Then the world became

dark and I couldn't see three feet in front of me. I held out the hand with the phone in front of me like a blind person. I put my other hand up to shield my eyes from the full force of the blowing sand. I slowed to a walk and hoped I wouldn't run into a cactus or fall into a hole.

I slowly made my way down the arroyo with my eyes all but shut from the blowing dust and dirt. When I guessed I was about twenty yards from the road, a large dark shape suddenly loomed in front of me. I wasn't sure what kind of cactus it was, but I was thankful I avoided it. I continued my slow shuffle until at last I felt the hill give way to a flat road.

The wind was blowing hard and I had to shout into the phone to be heard. "I'm on the road. Where are you?"

As if to answer, I saw a faint glow of lights briefly flash about thirty yards in front of me. I quickly ran to the lights and was relieved to see Gina's black Range Rover waiting on the road.

I climbed into the back seat and felt relieved when I closed the door. Sophie handed me a cold bottle of water and I downed it in four long swallows. I then spent several minutes with the air-conditioning blowing full in my face. My ears were still ringing. The skin on my face and arms felt raw from being blasted with the sand, but the pounding in my head had already started to slow down. I took it as a good sign.

I heard a click and looked up to see Sophie taking a picture of me with her phone.

"Sophie? What the hell?"

"I couldn't help myself. Do you know what you look like?" She then turned the phone so I could see the picture.

Yikes!

I was a grayish-brown color from head to toe. My shirt and pants both looked to be ruined, but the worst part was my hair. The brief rain had gotten me soaked, then the sand and dust had blown through my hair at sixty miles an hour. It was now hanging in a tangled mass of gray dreadlocks with some of the strands poking out at weird angles.

"Oh my God," I said as I looked down at the muddy mess I had made in the seat. "Gina, your car."

“Don’t worry about the car,” Gina said as she drove. “But try not to shake out too much of the sand until we can stop somewhere and brush you off.”

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As we drove back to Scottsdale, I told them all about my adventure. About halfway through my story, Sophie asked, “So, did you set the trailer on fire or did you blow it up?”

“Well, it started out as a fire, but then it blew up.”

Sophie laughed and clapped her hands. Gina shook her head, reached into a cubby in the dashboard, and handed Sophie a five-dollar bill.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“Gina bet five dollars you’d set something on fire. I said fire was a given. I bet five dollars you’d blow something up.”

I finished with all the details I could remember and showed them the pictures of the dead guy. Sophie thought it was a great story, but Gina became concerned.

“The smoke may alert the authorities there’s something amiss in the desert. If a deputy sheriff or the fire department goes out to investigate it will become official. You won’t have a choice but to contact the police with what you know, otherwise you could be charged with impeding an investigation. You also have evidence of a murder and you should report that in any case.”

“Oh, sure,” I said. “Reno will love that.”

“Plus, unless the fire destroyed the evidence of how you escaped, the bad guys are going to know someone was inside the trailer. They’ll assume that person knows all about the weapons and the corpse. That’s going to make some people very nervous.”

“Nervous?” Sophie said. “You blew up someone’s entire army stash. Somebody’s going to be pissed.”

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We drove back into Scottsdale, stopping twice so I could shake off some of the dirt and mud. Gina dropped me off at my car, which was still parked a couple of blocks from Southwest Desert. Gina then drove to the office where Sophie met with her earlier in the morning.

Since it was Saturday, Sophie had said she didn't want to spend a lot of time at the office, but she thought the software might have some news about where Johnny's mystery payments had come from. She said she'd give me a call if she found out anything.

I drove back to my apartment, keeping an eye out for the three guys who had been following me the night before. If they were out there, I never spotted them.

When I walked into my apartment, the first thing I did was to undress carefully on the tile floor of the kitchen. I put my clothes in a trash bag and would decide later if they could be saved or not. I then climbed into the shower to wash the sand, dirt, and mud from my hair. I noticed a burning plastic smell once the first layer of dirt came off.

Twenty minutes later, I stepped out of the shower feeling much better. I put on an outfit that was loose and comfortable. I then went to the kitchen, made a pot of coffee, and filled up my *Doctor Who* mug. I put on some music, then sat on my couch and tried to decide what to do next.

The business with the truck still had me rattled. I needed to sit for a while and get over it. As I sat, I thought about the army supplies and the dead guy. I didn't see how any of it fit in with what was happening at Arizona Transnational. I thought it more likely Southwest Desert Transport was just bad news all the way around and the fires at Arizona Transnational were only random acts of mischief by an overall evil company.

I was about to pour another cup of coffee when my phone rang with Sophie's ringtone. When I answered, I could tell Sophie was upset.

"Sophie, what's wrong?"

"You aren't gonna like this."

"Okay."

"No, seriously. You really aren't going to like this."

"Yeah, okay, I got that. What did you find?"

"Ummm. You aren't going to take it out on me if I give you bad news?"

"Sophie?"

"Well, okay, but don't kill the messenger. Even with the information we got from the bank president, it took me a while to dig this up. I found out

about the company that's doing the money transfers into Johnny's account. It's a division of a corporation owned by Escobar Salazar, Carlos the Butcher's boss, the head of the *Muerte Negro*."

"What? You're saying the Black Death is paying off Johnny Scarpazzi? No, I don't believe it. I already asked both Tony and Max about that possibility and they both said Johnny's totally loyal."

Even as I was defending Johnny, my heart sank. Unfortunately, I knew it would explain a lot of what had happened.

"Maybe that's what Tony and Max think," Sophie said, "but there's about two hundred thousand dollars in Johnny's account and it came from Salazar. More's coming in every week. I can't prove what the payments are for and I don't know if Carlos the Butcher is directly involved or not, but something's messed up."

Shit. How do I get myself in the middle of these things?

"Okay, I agree. Something's not right. I'll need to talk to Max about it."

"Well, yes. I suppose so. But still, you might wait awhile before you accuse Johnny Scarpazzi of being a spy. I've seen a lot of gangster movies. In a group like Tony's, that sort of accusation would probably carry a death warrant, either for the one accused or for the one doing the accusing, if the claim doesn't hold up."

"I'll try to be diplomatic."

"Good. I'd be bummed if you disappeared, too. Oh, the report has started coming back on Lew Lockridge. You aren't going to like this either, but the software says Carlos Valentino is a known associate."

"It figures. Okay, so we have a shady driver who works at a criminal trucking company and Carlos the Butcher has his fingerprints on everything."

"That's about the size of it. Are you still going to Elle's birthday party tonight? It's last minute, but I was thinking about seeing if Danielle wanted to come along, too. I think she'd get along great with everybody. I'm thinking about wearing my sexy new necklace."

Damn, I forgot about the party.

“It sounds like fun, but I’m not sure if I’m up for a night out with the girls. I’m still not over being locked in a truck with a dead guy, plus now I’m going to need to dig more into Johnny’s background. I don’t believe he’s a stoolpigeon, but at the moment, it’s the only thing that fits the facts. Now that Southwest Desert may be connected with Carlos the Butcher, I’ve got to see how that fits in.”

“Okay, but having hunky young men serve you drinks all night might take your mind off things. I’ll let Jackie and Elle know you’re in the middle of an assignment and couldn’t come. They’ll both understand. I’ll leave my phone on in case you change your mind. Give me a call and I’ll tell you where we ended up.”

I disconnected with Sophie and looked at the clock. I was surprised it was only three thirty. I’d been up since two in the morning and it had already been a very long day. I refilled my mug, then sat back on the couch. I flipped through the stack of bills sitting on my coffee table, trying to rearrange the payments to squeeze in an air conditioner repair. Unfortunately, none of my bills seemed to be optional this month.

Marlowe came in from the bedroom and hopped on my lap. I petted him and he purred with happiness. He then curled up and went to sleep. I picked up the still purring cat and sat him next to me on the couch. He rolled over, but otherwise didn’t protest. I leaned back on the couch, closed my eyes, and listened to the music.

Chapter Nine

I found myself walking down a hallway in a grimy and dimly lit building. The cinderblock walls were covered in graffiti and the floor was filthy with broken bottles and used syringes. Glass crunched under my shoes as I walked down the hall. I stopped at the doorway of a room where a group of men were laughing and playing cards. Although there were several men in the room, the only ones I could make out clearly were Carlos the Butcher, Johnny Scarpazzi, and the guy with the big red mark on the side of his face. This was the guy who had attacked me at Jackie's house, the one I fought off by shooting a stream of wasp spray in his face. He was also the same guy I fought with as he detonated the cake-bomb at Danica's wedding.

I tried to make out what they were saying, but nothing was clear. Johnny was smoking a big cigar and Carlos put his arm around his shoulders, as if they were best buddies. The wasp-spray guy looked up and saw me standing in the doorway. He got up, crossed the room, and stood in front of me.

"Bitch, you shouldn't be here," he said and slowly closed the door in my face.

I turned to leave and saw I was in Reno's living room. It must have been Christmas morning because there was a brightly lit tree. The Nutcracker was playing on the radio and three young children were busily handing out presents. A boy of about eight years old took a present from under the tree and put it on Reno's lap. Reno smiled and thanked him. A pretty little girl maybe five years old walked over to me and held up a present.

"Here you go, Mommy. I made it for you."

With a shock, I looked around the room. I lived here and these were my children. I had two girls and a boy. The boy looked like a smaller version of Reno and the girls both had my hair color. The children were unwrapping presents and giggling with happiness. I also felt a surge of happiness. Could this really be what it was like? Marriage, kids, and a family. Was this what I wanted?

I sat back on the couch and took in the family scene. The music on the radio slowly became louder until it became almost painful. The room

started to shrink. Reno and the kids were still unwrapping presents. Nobody but me seemed to notice we were now pressed tightly against each other. The presents and piles of wrapping paper surrounded me and I couldn't move my arms or legs. I began to panic and I looked around for a way out.

High on a bookshelf, I saw Marlowe, flicking his tail and casually looking down at the chaos. He looked at me and smiled. "You know," he said, "you don't have to be here. I'd slip out the back door if I were you."

I pushed my way up from the couch and made it to a green door in the back of the living room. I opened it and went into a long dark hallway. At the end of the hallway was a bright light and I heard the sound of seagulls. As I ran to the light, I noticed the floor didn't feel right. By the time I could see where I was going, the floor had turned to sand and the walls had become a dense tropical rainforest.

I stepped out from a group of palm trees and walked out onto a beautiful beach. A white cabana had been set up with lounge chairs and there was a table filled with food and drinks. I could faintly hear music from a steel drum band over the crashing waves. Max was sitting in one of the chairs and motioning me to the other.

"The sun's about to go down," he said. "Have a drink with me and we can watch it together."

I sat down next to Max and noticed I was in a bikini. He handed me a tropical rum drink and we watched the sun slowly sink into the ocean. Being next to Max, the sound of the waves, and the beautiful sunset made me feel at peace. I didn't want the feeling to end.

I glanced over at Max and saw a huge crab climbing up onto his lounge chair. The crab's claws were wildly snapping and I knew it wanted to slash Max until he was dead. The crab climbed onto Max's legs and I could tell it was about to attack. I waved to get Max's attention and pointed to the crab. He saw it but didn't seem concerned.

"It's alright," he said. "You sometimes get crabs on the beach."

Max pulled a pistol from a shoulder holster and fired at the crab. He shot again and again but couldn't seem to hit it. Max fired fifteen or twenty shots, but the crab continued to walk up his legs, claws snapping. The shots continued until they became a loud and confused noise.

My eyes slowly opened to the sound of my ringing phone. I picked it up and saw an unfamiliar Scottsdale number. When I answered, it was Tony DiCenzo.

I must have still been a little numb from both the dream and from everything that had happened today. Hearing Tony's voice didn't give me the adrenaline surge it normally did.

"Laura Black, I trust I'm not disturbing you?"

"No," I said, hoping I sounded awake. "You caught me at a good time. I'm at home with Marlowe, my cat."

"I'm glad. I've recently realized we've done nothing but business together since we first met. Even our golfing together was for business. If you have no plans for tonight, I was wondering if you'd like to join me at Junior Baker's club, strictly as a social occasion. I can't guarantee Max will be there, but if he is, I know he'll also be glad to see you. If you have any new information on Johnny, of course I'd like to hear it, but tonight will be mainly about enjoying ourselves."

Shit, what do you say when the Godfather asks you to a party?

"Um, sure, Tony. I'd like that. What time?"

"I have a couple of meetings scheduled at the club tonight, but they will be over by ten or so. Feel free to stop by any time after that. The band will be in full swing and the club should be warmed up by then."

I looked at the clock and saw it was almost seven. "Alright, Tony. I'll see you later tonight."

I disconnected the phone and immediately began to regret my decision.

What was I doing? Agreeing to a night on the town with Don Corleone and his merry men?

I realized I hadn't eaten all day and I was suddenly feeling very hungry. I went to the refrigerator, but there was nothing but a few bottles of condiments and some out-of-date milk. Acknowledging defeat, I opened the freezer. Three minutes later, I had two steaming microwaved burritos sitting on my plate.

Marlowe woke up and saw me in the kitchen. He ran in and looked up at me. I halfway expected him to start talking again. Fortunately, he only gave

me one of his squeaky meows. I opened a can of Deluxe Seafood Dinner and plopped a spoonful into his bowl. He sucked it down in a way that reminded me of someone slurping Jell-O off a plate.

I went into the living room and sat back on my couch to eat the burritos. I was still numb from the day and didn't think twice when I heard Marlowe in the kitchen, throwing up his dinner.

I decided I needed to take another shower. When I had taken my nap on the couch, my hair had still been damp and now it was sticking up in the back. As I stepped into the shower, I again caught a whiff of burning plastic.

After the shower, I blew my hair dry, then went to the closet. I pulled out my short black skirt that hangs just above the knee. This was my go-to skirt for a night on the town. It's made of a silky miracle fabric that never keeps a stain or wrinkles. I also like it because it has little silver sparkles that twinkle and flash as I move. I then pulled out a red knit top with a plunging neckline.

On the off-chance Max would be there, I picked out a pair of black sandals with a bit of a heel. I knew not to wear more than a short heel since I never know if I'll have to run after someone.

I went to my hiding place in the closet, pulled out the small jewelry box, and took out the diamond pendant. I held it up and it sparkled in the light of my bedroom.

Tony gave the diamond to me several months ago for helping him with a jewelry exchange. The meeting had gone badly and some people had been killed. The last time I wore the pendant was at Danica's wedding where both Tony and Max almost died. I was sort of hoping to take the jinx off the diamond by wearing it out where supposedly no one would get killed. I then looked in the box at the diamond and ruby bracelet Jackie had given me and at the ruby ring from Elizabeth. Each of the pieces brought up a different memory and thoughts of a good friend.

What the hell, I thought, and quickly put them all on.

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Keeping an eye out for the tail, I drove into downtown Scottsdale and parked in a public lot about a block away from the Carmine Hotel. The

hotel is beautiful, but smaller than the golf resorts of North Scottsdale. It generally serves business travelers when they come into downtown Scottsdale. The Carmine advertises itself as a boutique, probably to take advantage of the current trend in smaller hotels.

What I was interested in was around the side of the hotel, down a deep wide stairwell. At the base of the stairs was a large flashing red, white, and blue neon sign. It read *Junior Baker's Blues Club, Music Nightly*.

I had some mixed feelings as I went through the big wooden door and heard fast-paced, guitar-heavy Chicago blues. As I walked down the short hallway into the club, I couldn't help but remember this was where I first met Tough Tony DiCenzo, almost eight months earlier. At the time, I'd been terrified. Now it was different. I considered Tony a sort of a friend and I considered Max to be much more than a friend.

The club hadn't changed since the first time I'd been there. It wasn't large, but it was full of people. I was hoping Junior Baker would be playing tonight. It was his club and he was somewhat of a music legend in Scottsdale. Instead, there was a quartet of older men on the stage I didn't recognize. The small dance floor was packed and people were lined up three-deep at the bar. Everyone was laughing and seemed to be having a good time.

The bouncer standing at the entrance seemed to know who I was and had a hostess escort me through the dimly lit seating area to the private alcove in the back of the club. A goon stood on either side of the entrance and one of them efficiently went through my bag and quietly pocketed my Baby Glock.

The alcove was as I remembered it from the only other time I'd been there. The room consisted of nine or ten small tables, each with two or three chairs and each with a candle in a red glass bulb. Milo sat with another goon at a table near the entrance. At four of the other tables, a goon sat along with a woman. Three nicely dressed women were standing next to one of the empty tables, chatting with each other over the music. It was sort of a gangster version of date night.

Gabriella was seated alone in the back corner with her black bag on the table. As was her habit, her eyes were actively scanning both the room and

the club beyond. When she saw me, I thought I saw the slightest nod and perhaps even a hint of a smile.

A long black leather couch sat against the back wall. Sitting on the couch with Sal Monza was Tough Tony DiCenzo. Max was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't help being disappointed by this.

Almost as if it was timed, as I stepped into the alcove, the band took a break and everyone around me began talking and laughing.

Tony looked up and motioned me over. Sal stood up and greeted me as a friend. He then went over to talk with the three women standing by the empty table.

"Laura Black," Tony said. "I'm so glad you could make it tonight. What'll you have to drink? Still scotch with a single ice cube? I've gotten in an eighteen-year-old Glenfiddich. I've heard it's good and I've been meaning to try it."

"Thank you for remembering. That'll be perfect."

Tony motioned to a waitress who had come into the alcove and relayed the order.

As we sat, he looked at the pendant hanging around my neck. "That's the second time I've seen you wear that," he said. "I'm glad you've kept a token of our adventure with the Russians. However, it was perhaps thoughtless of me to give you a payment in something as non-liquid as a diamond. At the time, it seemed appropriate, but if you'd prefer, I could sell the diamond for you and give you the proceeds. I hear you live somewhat modestly. A hundred and fifty thousand or so in cash might better assist you."

"Thanks, Tony. I might need to take you up on that someday. But at the moment I'm doing okay."

*Sure, it would be nice to have the money, but how could I explain to Reno I was suddenly rich?*

The waitress came back and handed us each a drink. We looked at each other and clinked our glasses together. I took a sip and felt the scotch melt against my tongue. I took a moment to enjoy the experience. Tony also seemed lost in the moment of his first sip. After a minute of enjoying our drinks, Tony spoke.

“Now, Laura Black, I know we are here socially, but first what can you tell me about Johnny?”

“Well, starting with the basics, we’re tracking his credit cards and his phone. So far, no hits have been recorded on anything.”

“Yes, it’s the same on our side. Max may have told you we have an independent group looking into the disappearance. They’re tracking the same information with the same results.”

“As you know, Johnny’s girlfriend, Suzie, had Lenny notify the police. They’re going through their standard missing person protocols. So, they’re also tracking the phone and the credit cards. They’ve put Johnny’s information into a national database. If he’s contacted by law enforcement or EMS anywhere in the country, the Scottsdale police will be immediately notified.”

“That broadens the search beyond our local reach, but it also seems somewhat passive. I’ve always believed in direct action.”

“Same with me. I’ve followed up on some leads and looked into the likely places Johnny would go if he were simply in hiding. So far, I can’t find a trace of him. We’ve done a few computer searches and he’s doing very well financially.”

“As I’ve told you before, I’ve made Johnny a millionaire several times over.” Tony lowered his voice and leaned close to me. “Max told me about some unusual transactions you’ve discovered. I know you aren’t saying a lot about them and I applaud both your detective work and your discretion. However, I hope to put your mind at ease. No matter what you’ve discovered, Johnny Scarpazzi has my full confidence. I ask you to keep this in mind as you look for him.”

When Tony said this, I somehow got the feeling that he was telling me more than just the words were saying. He wanted me to understand some deeper meaning, but what that other meaning was eluded me.

“Okay, Tony, I’ll remember that.”

“It’s my fear that Johnny was taken by force, either by Carlos, or one of the other groups in Arizona. Of course, if that were the case, I would have expected some sort of ransom demand by now, but so far, we’ve heard

nothing. I have people looking into that aspect. Max is leading this effort. That's why he isn't with us tonight."

"Tony, when we've worked together before, you've had your guys watch over me. Last night, I noticed three guys who looked like they were following me. Are they yours?"

Tony paused and gave me a slightly puzzled look.

"No," he said. "I didn't feel it was necessary to offer you additional protection, as was necessary in our previous business. If these men are indeed following you, they're not mine."

"Thanks for the information. I'll need to sort out what to do with them."

"Do you feel the need for additional security? If so, I'll have a couple of my best guys assigned to you. They can be very discreet if necessary."

"No. If the men following me aren't yours, I'll need to find out who they're working for. That'll be harder to do if I have bodyguards with me. So far, they haven't done anything more than observe me from a distance. I should be okay."

"Very well," Tony said. "Thank you for telling me what you've found out about Johnny. I find it comforting to have a person who I trust handling this. I want you to know I very much appreciate it."

The band came back on the stage and started playing. Although some people held conversations over the music, most everyone spent the next hour listening to the band. The waitress was busy and no one in the alcove ever ran dry, including Tony and me. The only ones not drinking were Gabriella, Milo, and the hoodlum sitting with him at the table. I assumed they were all on duty. As Tony had predicted, the scotch was delightful. Between the two of us, we were putting a respectable dent in the bottle. The music was wonderful and the crowd on the dance floor was lively. It was the first time I'd felt completely relaxed since I'd been locked in the trailer.

After about an hour and a half, the band took another break and everyone started talking again. With the scotch in me, I found I had several questions I wanted to ask.

"Tony," I said. "Before I leave, there's something I've always been curious about. If you don't mind me asking, why do they call you Tough Tony?"

As soon as I said it, I noticed the other men in the room were leaning closer to listen. Maybe they didn't know either. Jeez, and these guys work for him?

"Well," Tony said, sitting back on the couch. He also saw he had an audience and he talked loud enough so everyone could hear. "I first got the name back in Brooklyn when I was fourteen. I'd just started working for the guys out there. One day I'm walking down the street to the building where they were conducting business. I'm almost there when three older boys came out of an alley and tried to shake me down. Now, I looked over and saw three of the guys I was working for sitting out on the front steps of the building, shooting the shit. I yelled out at them to give me a hand, but none of them could be bothered to get up and walk the fifty feet to help me out. I started to get a little nervous. I'm thinking the crooks I'm working for wouldn't give a shit if I got the crap beat outta me or not. When I saw it was all going to be up to me, I sorta went crazy and started hitting the motherfuckers. After about three minutes, I had broken one guy's nose and another guy's collarbone. They all ran away, screaming things like they were gonna come back with guns and mess me up good."

"What happened then?" I asked.

"When I walked up to the guys on the stairs, I realized that I had been merely providing entertainment for them as they sat on their asses. I was plenty pissed and I started yelling at them. I said, 'Hey you simple fucks, couldn't you see I was in trouble there? Didn't any of you think to lift a finger to help me out?' Then one of the guys said, 'Quit whining, Tony, we knew you were tough enough to take care of those little shits.' From then on around the neighborhood, I was Tough Tony, sort of an inside joke. Then one day, a few years later, somebody took a shot at me and I got winged pretty good. When the cops came nosing around, they said it looked like someone had my number. One of the neighborhood guys shouted back at the cop, 'Hey that's Tough Tony DiCenzo you're talking about, he'll be one hard mother to kill.' A guy from a newspaper heard that and then printed it. From then on, it sorta stuck."

I held up my glass in the universal guys' salute. "Thanks, Tony." I stood up to go and felt a little woozy from the scotch. My legs wobbled and I had to put my hand on a table to steady myself.

“I see you are in no condition to drive,” Tony said as he waved Milo over. “Milo, please give Miss Black a ride home. Alonso,” he said to the other goon at the table with Milo, “drive Miss Black’s car to her residence. Milo will give you a ride back here.”

I handed the Accord keys to Alonso and explained where I was parked. Milo and Alonso then took off to get the cars. Five minutes later, Milo reappeared at the door to the alcove. I walked out and retrieved my Baby Glock from the goon who had taken it earlier. Milo walked me through the club and out to the waiting Cadillac. He opened the door to the back and I slid in. I tried to put on the seat belt, but as with the last time I’d been in the car, the part where the buckle attached was buried underneath the seat cushion. It took a minute of digging to get it out.

“It’s nice to see you again,” Milo said as he drove. He sounded a little stressed or maybe upset. “How’s Sophie?”

“She’s good. She’s out with Gina and the cougars tonight. One of the girls is having a birthday and I imagine they’ll end up somewhere nice for the party, probably the Saguaro Sky. So, what’s up with you and Sophie? You go from dating, to not dating, then back to dating?”

“Oh, I don’t know. We get along fine until I talk about moving in together. Then she’ll get mad and shut me out for a week or two. I know she doesn’t want to get serious, but I can’t help it. I think she’s wonderful and I only want to be closer with her.”

“I know she cares about you. Maybe she needs more time to get used to the idea of being with someone long-term. What about you? I can’t imagine you grew up wanting to work in organized crime. Are you thinking about making this a career?”

“Well, it wasn’t my intention and I know Sophie would rather I had a legitimate job. But I’ve been working for Tony for five years now and the money’s better than I can get anywhere else.”

“I think she worries about you and your career choice. I’m sure it’s part of the reason she’s having a hard time committing.”

Milo nodded as though I’d said something he already knew. I couldn’t help but notice he still seemed upset. I could see in the mirror that he had a sort of weird look on his face.

“Hey,” I said. “Are you alright?”

“I’m not sure. Is Sophie pregnant?”

*Oh, shit.*

“Um, where’d you hear that?”

“I have a friend of a friend who knows somebody who works in your office. She knows I’ve been seeing Sophie and she heard Sophie was pregnant.”

“No, Sophie’s not pregnant.”

“It’s alright if she is. I’d stand by her and everything, if she wanted to go through with it and have the baby.”

“I can guarantee you, Sophie’s not pregnant.”

“I can take responsibility for my actions. It’s not like I’d try to deny it or run away or anything.”

“Look, I promise you. Sophie’s not pregnant. I’d be the first one she’d tell and she’s not pregnant.”

I could see by the look on his face that he wasn’t convinced.

*Sophie isn’t going to be happy with me.*

Milo turned into my parking lot and pulled up close to the building. Alonso had already parked my car and handed me the keys as he helped me out of the Cadillac. Milo insisted he walk with me to my apartment while Alonso waited in the car. We made it to my door without incident and Milo then made me wait in the hallway while he went in and did a quick search of the apartment.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I said when he was through.

“Yes, I did. Tony wanted me to make sure you got home okay. If someone had been waiting for you in your apartment and I hadn’t checked it out first? Well, let’s just say Tony wouldn’t be happy with me. I try to avoid being on his shit list.”

“Okay, I see your point. Thanks for checking.” I saw the look on his face and could almost hear his thoughts.

“Really,” I said. “She’s not.”

Milo nodded as if he understood, then left. I walked into my bedroom, pulled off my clothes, and tossed them in the direction of the hamper. I grabbed the first T-shirt I could find for a nightgown. It had been a very long day and I collapsed onto the bed.

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I slowly woke up and saw it was almost nine. Marlowe was curled up at my feet. When he felt me stir, he quickly got up and ran into the kitchen. I felt surprisingly good considering everything that had happened the previous day.

Even though it was Sunday and I was technically off work, I wanted to get started as soon as possible. My first step was to go over everything to see what I'd missed.

I put on a pot of coffee and fed Marlowe. I then took a quick shower and got dressed. Sitting at my kitchen table, I organized my notes and tried to figure out my next moves.

Johnny was the more frustrating assignment. The assumption by Max was that Johnny had been taken by force. That felt right, but I had no evidence it was true. I'd searched into his personal life and in the obvious places he would be hiding, but so far had nothing. He could have been kidnapped, he could have chosen to disappear voluntarily, or he could already be dead. I needed to find out which one it was.

The trucking company thing still wasn't coming together as anything other than some random mischief by a person or persons unknown. The assumption here was that Southwest Desert was behind it. The evidence for this was flimsy, but Southwest Desert was definitely an evil company and it seemed like something they'd do. I needed to go back and start talking to people until I could make a connection.

The phone rang with Sophie's ringtone. When I answered, she sounded excited.

"I stopped by the office a few minutes ago and checked the searches. We had activity last night on one of Johnny's credit cards."

"Wow, that's great news, but what are you doing at the office on a Sunday morning?"

“I came in to enter a search for Gina. When I turned on the computer there was a hit on Johnny.”

“Tell me about it. Where is he?”

“Okay, here’s the messed-up part. The hit came from a bar called the Winchester Saloon at the Scottsdale Blue Palms at eleven thirty last night. If I remember right, that’s one of Tough Tony’s hotels.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. If Johnny’s hiding, why would he go to one of DiCenzo’s hotels? If he’s not hiding anymore, why didn’t we hear about it already? Besides, both the police and the investigators Tony hired are monitoring Johnny’s credit cards. If the card was used last night, why haven’t we gotten a phone call before now?”

“Well, that part I can answer. The credit card he used doesn’t have his name on it. You know how he owns about a dozen companies in secret? This card is on a corporate account from one of those. I only knew about it from the deep dive we did. I doubt the police would have any way to trace it back to him. It’s like Johnny wanted a few people to know he was there, but he didn’t want to broadcast it to the entire world.”

“I’ll call Max on this. Maybe he can make sense out of it. How was the birthday party last night?”

“It was great. I wish you had come. Jackie put together a reception in one of the atriums at the Saguaro Sky. There was a three-piece acoustic band and about forty people showed up. Jackie went all out with the buffet. I drank champagne and ate lobster claws all night. You should have seen it. Gina went nuts on the prime rib and king crab legs. I know Elle didn’t want a big party, but she seemed to have a nice time.”

“Did Danielle come, too?”

“She met up with us at the hotel about nine. I introduced her around and everyone seemed to like her. She was surrounded by a circle of men most of the night, so I guess she had a good time. What did you do all night? Did you ever get all of that mud out of your hair?”

“It took a while, but it all came out. I’d planned on staying in, but DiCenzo called and asked me over to Junior Baker’s. I ended up staying there until about twelve thirty.”

“Tough Tony asked you out on a date?”

“Not exactly. I think he wanted a personal update on Johnny, but didn’t want to make it seem like he was ordering me to report to him. Actually, I had a nice time.”

“Was Max there or was it only you and Tony?”

“Well, it was Tony, Gabriella, Milo, and about a dozen mobsters. Most of them brought their girlfriends.”

“A bar full of gangsters and their molls? It sounds like something from *Goodfellas*.”

“It was different. Oh, um, I talked to Milo last night. He still has it bad for you.”

“I know. We talked on the phone before I went out last night. It’s not as if I don’t like him, but seriously, he’s a low-level henchman in the Scottsdale mafia. Don’t tell Gina, but I know she’s right about dating a criminal. I told him that we could date all he wanted to, but I’m not ready to move in with anyone. I could tell he was upset last night.”

“Um, there’s something else. About why he was upset.”

“Okay, so what’s wrong?”

“Um, he heard a rumor you’re pregnant. I told him it wasn’t true, that you weren’t.”

“Shit. See, I told you these things take on a life of their own. Oh, damn.”

“What?”

“That would explain it.”

“Explain what?”

“Sonia came up to me last night and asked how I was feeling, like she was all concerned about me. I told her the champagne was making my head swim, but other than that, I felt great. When I said that, she gave me the weirdest look.”

“I’m sorry. I was only trying to get Amber to stop wearing her perfume around you.”

“I know, but it’s the sort of rumor that’ll take months to go away. You owe me big time now. You know that, don’t you? We’re talking serious favors, whenever I need them.”

I apologized once again, hung up with Sophie, and called Max. As always, his deep steady voice both seemed to calm me and excite me at the same time.

“Good morning,” he said. “I’m sorry I missed you at Junior Baker’s last night. I heard everyone had a good time.”

“It was great. Does Tony go there a lot?”

“Maybe twice a month. I know he enjoys it, but work often interferes with scheduling social nights out. How are you feeling today?”

“I’m good. Hey, we got a hit on one of Johnny’s credit cards last night.”

“Really, this is the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Remember I told you Johnny has several secret accounts scattered around the world? It was a card issued from one of those. I’m not surprised the police and your guys missed it.”

“Where is he? What have you been able to find out?”

“The card was used last night at the Winchester Saloon.”

“You mean over at the Blue Palms?”

“Right. The card was charged at about eleven thirty last night.”

“Do you know for sure it was Johnny or could someone have found the card and went to a bar to see if it was any good?”

“So far, that’s all I have. Do you have any kind of video surveillance over there?”

“I’m sure we have cameras in the parking lot. I’ll check to see what we have inside the saloon. The Winchester mainly caters to golfers playing the Maricopa course during the day. After hours, it’s usually pretty quiet. I hate to get my hopes up, but up until now, I’ve been fearing the worst.”

“Yeah, me too. Call me when you find out anything?”

“Why don’t we meet for dinner? I should know something by then, plus it would be a nice excuse to see you again.”

No, dinner is definitely not a good idea.

“Alright, where should I meet you?”

“Let’s go back to Different Pointe of View. I love looking at the city and I can’t think of a nicer place to talk. We can sit up there and watch the evening thunderstorms roll through the valley.”

“That sounds nice. Seven o’clock?”

“I’ll make the reservations and see you up there.”

I sat on the couch and debated whether or not to let Suzie know about the hit on Johnny’s credit card. I really had no information on who had used the card and I didn’t want to get her hopes up. On the other hand, this did seem significant and she was the client.

I called and when she answered, I could tell she was feeling down.

“Hey,” I said. “How are you doing?”

“I’m alright. I seem to go from hopeful to feeling depressed to feeling hopeful again. I think you’re catching me in a depressed period.”

“Are you at home? Why don’t I come over and we can talk. We’ve had some movement on the investigation. I don’t know what it means yet, but we can go over it.”

“I’d love the company. I’ve canceled my appointments for today and sitting here with nothing to do has got me fidgety.”

“Okay,” I said. “Give me the address and I’ll be there in about half an hour.”

I walked out to the back parking lot, unlocked my car, and got in. Even though it wasn’t hot yet, the day promised to be another scorcher. I reached in my purse for my lipstick, but couldn’t find it anywhere. Annoyed, I drove to a pharmacy and got some cherry flavored lip-gloss. I hate having dry lips.

I wonder how Max feels about kissing dry lips?

Chapter Ten

I drove to the address Suzie had given me and was surprised when it was close to Muffy Sternwood's, on the south side of Mummy Mountain. The neighborhood was a mix of old money mansions and larger new houses. Suzie lived in a beautiful modern house with a great view of Paradise Valley and the north side of Camelback Mountain.

I pulled into the circular driveway and parked next to Suzie's car, the red *Nasty1* Jaguar. The front door to the house opened and Suzie let me in.

I hadn't been sure what I was expecting. I didn't think Suzie would have set up her living room as a medieval dungeon, but I was surprised at how beautiful the house was. The interior was very modern and had a fun and playful feeling.

Suzie led me to the living room that had a beautiful view out a floor to ceiling window. Original impressionist-style oil paintings were on the walls and Courtney Barnett was playing on the sound system. I stood at the window and looked out over Paradise Valley and Camelback Mountain while Suzie went into the kitchen to get us each a glass of wine.

"This is gorgeous," I said when she returned. "It's amazing that all of this came out of your Mistress McNasty business."

"It amazes me, too," Suzie said. "I started out wanting to help people, so I went into teaching. I was always technical, so I ended up in computer engineering. Being a dominatrix also lets me help people, but in a much more personal way. It's a service in high demand, but with a limited supply of good people. I'm lucky to have fallen into it."

"Here's to enjoying what you do," I said and I held my glass up. Suzie clinked hers against mine and we both took a long sip of the delicate wine.

"You said you had some information on John?" Suzie asked.

"Yes, a card belonging to Johnny was used last night at a bar in Scottsdale. Right now, that's all I have. It could have been used by Johnny or someone could have found it and used it. The people who own the bar are reviewing the security tapes. As soon as they find anything, they'll let me know. When I hear from them, you'll be the first one I call."

“You don’t know how much I appreciate what you’re doing for me. I know the police are also looking into it, but somehow I get the feeling you’ll produce more results than they will.”

“I’ll do my best to get him back.”

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After I left Suzie’s, I stopped by the apartment to change for my date with Max. I started with a conservative outfit, but kept changing my mind until I found myself in a short red dress. The neck was low and with the help of the right bra, Max would get an eyeful of cleavage. I also put on the diamond necklace to help direct him to the right area. I wasn’t exactly trying to lead him on, but dressing sexy for him did seem to feel right.

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On the drive over to the restaurant, I started thinking about both Reno and Max.

With Reno, the first thing I get is a feeling of being safe. Everything about him is comforting. When we’re together, I feel good. He’d make a good husband and a good dad. We’d get a house in a quiet Scottsdale neighborhood and have backyard cookouts with the neighbors. If I stayed with Reno, I know I’d have a good life.

But if I was being honest with myself, I was hoping for more than good. I was hoping for great. I’ve always envisioned my life as a wild ride. When I’m old and I look back, I want to know I’ve done everything possible and done it with a casual recklessness. I want to be the one people talk about when they talk about a woman who’s done everything, mostly the good, but also some of the doubtful. I’m starting to think someone who always follows the rules might not be the best choice for me.

When I think of Max, I think of someone exciting and I know my life around him would never be boring. I know we would see the world and see it from both sides. Traditional values of right and wrong wouldn’t apply to us. But I also knew in my heart that Gina was right. Being with Max would be a life of uncertainty. I’d be constantly in fear of either the FBI or the rival gangs. Yes, Reno’s a cop and there’s always the possibility he can be hurt on the job, but with Max, the danger seems more real, more immediate.

Forget children or anything approaching routine. Being with Max would be a lifetime of holding onto the tiger's tail.

It was the same argument I'd been having with myself for months and I wasn't sure how I would resolve it.

I pulled into the parking lot and walked up the hill to the main entrance. I made my way into the restaurant and wasn't surprised Max had beaten me there. I also wasn't surprised our table had a perfect view of the city.

Max saw me as I walked onto the terrace and stood up to greet me. I did my best to restrain myself and not jump up on him. This was even though I desperately wanted my legs to be circling his waist while I covered his face in kisses. I congratulated myself when I only clung to him for a few seconds after our hug.

With the sun down, the evening was warm, but no longer hot. The terraces for both the restaurant and the lounge were packed with people talking, laughing, and admiring the view. Max ordered each of us a scotch and I was grateful when our drinks were quickly delivered. I needed something to keep from babbling at him like a teenager on a first date.

We both sipped our drinks and looked out over the lights of the city. From our perch on the hill, we could see across the valley to the mountains on the other side of Phoenix.

"What did you find out about Johnny?" I asked.

"We reviewed the tapes and the good news is the person at the bar appeared to be Johnny. I can't say with one hundred percent certainty, but I'm relatively confident he was there last night."

"Tell me about the bar. Why didn't anyone notice him?"

"The Winchester Saloon is outside the central part of the resort. It's in a building of its own next to the main pro shop. During the day, it caters to golfers and is always busy, but at night, the place is usually half-dead. In the summer there's even less traffic. That time of the night, there's only six or eight people working in total. The employees last night were all relatively new and no one had ever seen Johnny before, so they didn't know to notify us when he came in."

"What did the video show? I assume you have security cameras both in the parking lot and in the bar?"

“Yes, and we reviewed the security tapes, but the quality is pretty low. I don’t know how helpful it will be. After the mess we had with Alex Sternwood, we’ve been upgrading all of our cameras to high-definition digital. Unfortunately, the cameras in that part of the resort still run on an old video tape system.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“The tape showed that Johnny, or someone who looked a lot like Johnny, was there with three men. Two other men were behind them at a table about fifteen feet away and could also have been part of it. Johnny didn’t look drugged or restrained, but two of the guys he was with seemed to have a hand in their jacket pockets the entire time. Keep in mind it was probably in the nineties outside, but the men were still wearing sport coats.”

“What happened after they arrived?”

“Not a thing. They came in, ordered a round of beer, and drank them quickly. Johnny paid with a credit card and they left. In all, they were in the bar for about twenty minutes. It seems like someone merely wanted to taunt us. I assume it was Carlos and the five men surrounding Johnny were his hired thugs. I can only assume Johnny was there against his will.”

“And if he wasn’t?” I asked.

“You mean Johnny turned traitor, knew we’d find out about it, and was simply rubbing our noses in it? No, I don’t believe that.”

But you also don’t know about the payments from Carlos.

“I don’t think so either, but we really have no way of knowing.”

“Well, Tony agrees with me. Actually, the strangest part about this has been Tony’s reaction to it. He’s been somewhat secretive about both Johnny and the kidnapping. It’s almost as if Tony expected Johnny to be taken. He also didn’t seem overly surprised at your news of money transfers. Tony told me to ignore how it appears and that Johnny is clean. I trust Tony completely, but I agree with you. Something’s very wrong with this. We’ve pulled in everyone from throughout Arizona and have them searching the city.”

Max then smiled and gave out a small laugh.

“What?”

“Tony also said he should have known you’d find Johnny before the agency he hired. He said if this happens again, we’ll go straight to you.”

“That’s very nice of him, but Sophie’s the one who actually found out about Johnny’s credit card. Let’s talk about something else. It’s beautiful here and we never get a chance to just sit and talk.”

“Of course, what would you like to talk about?”

“Um, tell me about Gabriella. That woman is a mystery and she sort of scares the crap out of me. What’s her story? How’d Tony find her?”

“Tony didn’t find her. I did.”

“You did?” The shock must have sounded in my voice.

“There’re a few things you don’t know about me yet. One of these is that I used to work for the government. A small group, you wouldn’t have heard of them.”

“What? Were you a spy? Military? Special Forces?”

“Sort of. It’s complicated. But when I was in Eastern Europe about ten years ago on an assignment, I sort of ran into Gabriella. She was working for her government in a somewhat similar role. She was very good at what she did, but her government was in the process of collapsing. I was the middleman in the negotiations to switch her over to our side.”

“So, what happened?”

“We both spent the next few years working for Uncle Sam. We went to some interesting places together, but eventually our time was up and we left the group. I had some connections in New York and they arranged an introduction with Tony. That was the damndest thing. Tony and I met on a golf course and we got along well. He didn’t even get upset when I soundly beat him. When he hired me, I asked if Gabriella could have a position as well. At first, Tony was hesitant, but then he found out about her very particular set of skills. Within a few years, she’d become his personal bodyguard and has been ever since.”

“Tony seems like a force of nature. Whenever I look at someone in a position of leadership, I always wonder how they got there. I wonder if they got it through hard work or luck. Maybe both?”

“Tony’s life is pretty much an open book. It’s true he came up from nothing. His parents were from Italy. They immigrated to New York right after the second World War and lived in Brooklyn. His dad drove a cab and did warehouse work. His mom took in clothes to mend and babysat the neighbors’ kids. They both died young and I know Tony’s always been disappointed he wasn’t able to take care of them as they aged.”

“Tony seems like a loner. He doesn’t wear a wedding ring, so I assume he’s not married. Does he ever date?”

“Tony was married once, a long time ago. He even had a son. They both died and he doesn’t like to talk about it. I’ve heard it was a car accident back in New York a year or so before he came out to Arizona. He has some women he sees on a regular basis, but I don’t think he’s all that interested in getting married again. But I’d rather talk about you and me. Do you think we could have a future together?”

Shit, don’t ask me now. I’m feeling very vulnerable.

“You know my rule about becoming romantically involved with criminals.”

Of course, lately I’ve been thinking I don’t care so much about my rule.

“What if I went strictly legitimate?” he said. “Would your rule towards me still apply?”

“How can you stop doing what you’re doing? You mean you’d quit your job? Do you think Tony would let you do that?”

“Why not? Financially, I’m set for life. What I do for a career from here on is mostly a matter of choice. I said I’d get away from anything illegal, I didn’t say I’d leave the organization. Tony knows I have ambitions beyond moving up on that side of the business. We have several legitimate divisions that have nothing to do with the other side. I could ask Tony to move me to one of those. I’ve been thinking I could run one of the resorts. I’d be good at that.”

“But you’re the number two man in the entire organization. You’d be willing to throw away years of work with Tony just to run a hotel?”

“There are three other guys who’d be glad to have my position and each of them would be good at it. Plus, it would hardly be throwing away years of work. I’d be filling an important position. We’re having a hard time

finding someone to run the new place we're building with Muffy Sternwood. The people we have running our resorts don't need to know all the day-to-day activities of the other side, but it's helpful if they have an idea what goes on. It keeps them from interfering. It's always been a delicate balance, telling them enough but not too much. That's why Alex Sternwood was a good choice to run the hotel portion of the new resort. He already knows the other side. But a resort isn't only a hotel. There's also the golf, not to mention the restaurants, the shops, landscaping, maintenance, and the conference center. There'll be a manager for each of those, but you need somebody with a broader picture to manage the entire operation. It's sort of like being the mayor of a small city."

"Jerk, you know what I meant. You'd be willing to give up your position with Tony to go off and run a resort?"

"Laura, I know you don't know everything about me yet, but the cake bomb was only my latest brush with death. I honestly think I should get out before my luck completely runs out. So yes, if you were with me, running a resort would be a good life. Would you like to give it a try?"

Oh shit, what do I do?

My mind raced and my heart pounded. Was this what I wanted? I knew I could have a good life with Reno while Max was still a mystery. Did I want to toss away a sure thing on an unknown? Even an exciting unknown? Would this be something I'd spend years regretting? And a small part of me wondered if it was just the mysterious part that I found so exciting.

As my mind raced back and forth, considering possibilities and pondering my long-term goals, I noticed that another part of my mind was gradually becoming happier. I felt the happiness spreading, gently pushing away my worries and concerns. I slowly became aware that the feeling wasn't just happiness, it was also a feeling of being safe and being loved. Until now, I'd only had these sensations when I was with Reno. For a moment, this confused me, but then I knew what I had to do. As soon as I made my decision, worry was swept away and happiness washed over me.

"Okay," I said. "Let's do it." I took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "But I'll need a few days to end things. You know where I'm at with Reno and this isn't going to be easy for either of us."

Max broke out in a broad smile. “I understand. Take whatever time you need. It’ll take a few weeks for me to finish up the projects I’m working on, but I’ll tell Tony I’d like to move to resort operations as soon as possible. Once we’re both free, let’s take a couple of weeks off to celebrate. I’m thinking somewhere secluded with a white sand beach and lots of palm trees.”

“Okay, we both have some things to work through, but then we can start a new adventure together.”

I stopped paying attention to what I was eating or drinking and I even forgot about the view. Max was talking to me, but I only halfway followed the conversation, nodding my head at whatever seemed like the appropriate times. My mind was racing over what I’d done and I was already trying to second-guess myself. Most of all, I was happy and that drove out all other thoughts.

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As Max walked me out to my car, I noticed we had the parking lot to ourselves. Max must have noticed it, too, because when we got to my Honda, he held his arms out to me. Without thinking, I melted into him. He then bent down and gave me a kiss. This wasn’t the lustful kiss of our first encounter or even the desperately shameless kiss from when I had attacked him on Johnny’s bed. This was the slow kiss of two people who were in love and had their entire lives in front of them. It was the most perfect kiss I’d ever had.

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After I watched Max’s car drive out of the parking lot, I sat and thought about my promise. It still seemed a little surreal. I know I had told Max I would stop seeing Reno and be with him. The thought of that both excited and thrilled me. But I also know that a lot of hurt feelings would need to happen first. I wasn’t sure if I was up to the task or if I could go through with it at all.

The next few days are going to suck.

I pulled out my phone and called Suzie. When she answered, I could tell she was apprehensive.

“Suzie, it’s Laura. I have some news about what we talked about this afternoon.”

I heard her suck in a breath, as if she was expecting the worst.

“No,” I said. “It’s mostly good news. Johnny was seen late last night and it appears he was the one who used the credit card. The bad news is he’s likely being held against his will.”

Suzie blew out her breath and I could hear she was close to tears.

“But you’re sure he’s alive?”

“Yes, well almost sure. Someone who looked exactly like him used his credit card at a Scottsdale bar last night. We have a grainy video where he appears to be alright, but he was surrounded by several men. I got the information second-hand and I don’t have a lot of detail other than that. I’ll let you know as soon as I find out anything else.”

“Thank you for calling.” Her voice was still unsteady. “I’ve been so worried. The other part doesn’t make any sense. I don’t understand why someone would want to kidnap him.”

“There’s a lot we don’t know at this point,” I said. “The important thing is that he’s alive. There’ll be a lot of people searching for Johnny tonight and tomorrow. I’m sure we’ll be able to resolve this in a few days.”

“I’ll be at home all week. Call me as soon as you know something.”

“You’ll be the first to know.”

My next call was to Lenny. Whenever I call him at home, he’s seldom in a good mood. Tonight didn’t seem to be an exception.

“What?”

“We’ve had some activity on Johnny Scarpazzi.”

“Well? Where is he?”

“I don’t know where he is.”

“Well, what do you have?”

“There was a hit on a credit card at a bar in one of DiCenzo’s resorts. I got in touch with my contact over there and they were able to come up with a video. It apparently showed Johnny’s alive, but is likely being held

against his will. It looked like the kidnappers were parading him in front of the cameras to show DiCenzo they had him.”

“So, if I’m hearing you right, this is no longer a simple case of Mistress McNasty having a missing boyfriend. This is now part of a dispute between Tough Tony DiCenzo and some other group?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“Shit, why’d you bring us into this? This is the second time we’ve been in the middle of one of these mafia wars. I don’t want to be known as the law firm that takes on Tough Tony’s dirty work. I can see this going south for us, fast.”

“DiCenzo has everyone out looking for Johnny. Hopefully, they’ll come up with something in the next day or two. Are we okay not informing the police?”

There was a pause and I heard Lenny take a sip of something, probably a Jim Beam on the rocks. “We usually have a good relationship with the police, but we’ll need to be careful with anything involving Tough Tony. You said DiCenzo’s men are the only ones who’ve seen the video?”

“As far as I know.”

“What about the credit card? This is the first I’ve heard about it. When was it used? Why haven’t the police contacted us?”

“It was used last night and we only know about it because of our government database software. It was an account from a company Johnny owns, but his name isn’t on it. I doubt the police would have spotted it.”

“Okay, so at the moment you only have a possible lead and you’re currently following up on it. You know about some credit card usage that may or may not be tied to our client and you have some hearsay evidence he was spotted in Scottsdale. Once you have something solid, you’ll report back to me and then we can go to the police. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Going to the police for Mistress McNasty is one thing. Informing the police on something involving Tony DiCenzo is another. Well, is that it?”

“That’s it.”

“Fine. Call me with better news next time.”

I disconnected with Lenny, then looked at the phone. I knew what I had to do, but I was dreading it. Once I made the next call, it would put things into motion and once started it would be almost impossible to stop.

I took a deep breath and called Reno. I was hoping he’d still be working and I could leave a message. Instead, he picked up on the second ring.

“Hey,” I said. “You’re not working tonight?”

“I just got home. It’s been a long and frustrating weekend. How’s your weekend been? Hopefully better than mine.”

“Mostly the usual. I’d like to talk with you. Do you have any time in the next day or two?”

“Over the phone or in person?”

“Let’s do this one in person.”

“You sound kind of glum. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Just wanted to talk.”

“The next few nights will be tough. Activity at the warehouse has stepped up and the lieutenant has put us on overlapping shifts to increase coverage. I’m due to have Thursday night off, that’s in four days. Will that work for you? We could do dinner at Frankie’s. Seven o’clock? We can talk about the weekend.”

“Sure, Frankie’s at seven on Thursday will be perfect.”

“Feel free to bring over another outfit. I think I still have room in my closet for one more.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

This is really going to suck.

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I was sound asleep and in the middle of a dream about Max when my phone rang. I slowly woke up and picked it up. The call was local, but I didn’t recognize the number. When I answered, it was Manuel, the guard at Arizona Transnational.

“Sorry for the time of night,” he said. “I know it’s early and I probably woke you, but you asked me to call you in case anything came up. We had another fire last night. It wasn’t big and the guys put it out right away. The cameras got the whole thing. I’m about to go off shift, but if you’d like, I could email you copies of the videos. We were able to get some good pictures of the car, but not the license plate. We also have video of the guy walking up to the fence and tossing a bottle filled with gasoline and a burning rag. Unfortunately, the lighting is poor and you can’t make out his face.”

“Thanks,” I said. I rolled over and saw it was five thirty. “Use the email address on the card. If you’re going to be around later tonight, I might have some questions.”

“No problem,” he said. “I’m back on shift tonight at eleven.”

I disconnected the phone and tossed it on my nightstand. I didn’t have to get up for another hour, but I knew sleep was over for the night. I turned on the TV and watched the morning news until it was actually time to get up.

I took a shower and got dressed. I was drinking a third cup of coffee when my phone *dinged* several times to let me know I had new email. I went to my desk, opened my laptop, and saw a series of video files from Manuel.

The first video was of the back fence-line at Arizona Transnational. The camera showed a white car driving around to the back of the property. Other than that, I couldn’t make out a lot of detail.

The second file showed a nice picture of the car pulling to a stop next to the back fence. I could tell it was a white Mustang hardtop with a thick black or maybe a dark blue stripe running down the hood. I don’t know a lot about the different models, but it looked to be eight or ten years old. The car’s lights were off and the license plate was hidden in shadows. There was nothing unusual about the car. No dents or gashes were visible to help identify it.

A man got out of the car holding a bottle, which seemed to have a white rag sticking out of it. The man looked to be medium height and weight. He had on a gray hoodie that obscured his face.

As I watched, the man pulled out a lighter, lit the wick, and tossed the bottle over the fence in the direction of a line of trailers. The bottle fell short and landed instead on a stack of wooden pallets about twenty feet inside the fence line. The man quickly got back into his car and sped away. As the car turned, the camera sort of got the license plate, but with the distance and the movement, it was impossible to read any of the numbers.

The last video was a wide view of the lot between the main building and the back fence. This shot showed the Mustang pulling up, the man getting out, and the lit bottle going over the fence. It then showed the stack of pallets catching fire. The fire was burning for about three minutes before men could be seen running toward it holding fire extinguishers. There were several blasts of white gas and the fire was put out.

After watching the videos, I felt a little let down. This was starting to look less like a serious attempt at industrial intimidation and more like a random jerk who liked to start fires. I knew Lenny wasn't going to be pleased.

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At five minutes to eight, I pulled into the parking lot at Southwest Desert. A small shudder went through me as I remembered what had happened here two nights ago. In the back of my mind, I was trying to think of a way they could have figured out who'd blown-up their trailer. If they'd somehow discovered the truth, things here would get very exciting in a hurry.

As I walked toward the main building, I glanced around the parking lot. Sitting on top of the building was a camera. I had to wonder if the people who worked here had reviewed the security videos from Saturday night, the same way as I had this morning. I tried to remember the path I had taken from the parking lot to the warehouse and wondered if I could have been recognized.

I took a deep breath as I opened the door to the office. I halfway expected to be met by group of angry gangsters. Instead, Phyllis and Irene were calmly talking to each other and Danielle was typing on her computer. Nobody seemed excited as I walked in. I took this as a good sign and started to relax. I went over to Danielle's desk. When she saw me, she greeted me with a big smile.

“Hey,” she said. “I’m glad you decided to come back. The second day is the worst for people not showing up again. The party Saturday night at the Saguaro Sky was wonderful. I’m sorry you couldn’t make it. I’d never been up there before. The hotel’s beautiful and it’s amazing you actually know the owner. Sophie said you and Jackie Wade had an adventure together a few months ago, but I’d need to ask you for the details.”

“Sure, I’ll tell you all about it sometime. I heard you were pretty popular with the men there.”

Danielle blushed a little and looked down at the papers on her desk. “It was nice having so many men talking with me. I don’t go out very much and I hate going by myself to bars. But the party was a lot of fun.”

“Well, feel free to come with us whenever you’d like.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that. Are you ready to learn more about billing and scheduling or can you already do it by yourself?”

“Give me another morning of training,” I said. “Then I’ll be able to do it all.”

Danielle handed me off to Irene who again went over the scheduling. The work was as dull as I remembered from the week before. I kept my eyes and ears open, searching for any sign they knew I’d been there early Saturday morning. Fortunately, no one seemed to take any notice that I was there.

After two hours, I was handed off to Phyllis who again showed me how to do the billing. As it turned out, the billing mostly involved filing paper invoices, purchase orders, and receipts in a long row of filing cabinets.

Phyllis had given me a stack of PO’s to file and I was about halfway through it, when the back door to the warehouse opened and a man came out. As soon as I saw him, alarm bells started going off in my head.

He was average height, average weight, with short black hair and a mustache. He seemed to be in his late thirties. I tried to remember where I’d seen him, but I couldn’t place him. All I knew was I’d seen him somewhere before and he was bad news. Fortunately, he completely ignored me and instead went over to Danielle’s desk. My first thought was that he was about to start trouble, but he only quietly stood next to Danielle’s desk and

asked her a few questions in Spanish. She answered back in Spanish and the guy went back through the door to the warehouse.

What the hell?

Danielle's use of Spanish didn't bother me since Spanish is the unofficial second language of Arizona. The part that was shooting red flares in my head was that I knew the guy, but I couldn't remember how I knew him. I didn't think he was one of Tony's and I didn't remember seeing him with Carlos the Butcher. Of course, I've had dealings with several groups of hoodlums over the last few years and he could have been with any one of those.

The more I thought about it, I was also troubled by the thug's attitude toward Danielle. I had expected him to either act tough or to be smooth and try to charm her. Instead, he was simply polite and perhaps even respectful. I seldom saw that type of behavior in a gangster. For some reason, the more I thought about it the more it bugged me.

Chapter Eleven

At five minutes to noon, Danielle walked over to my desk. I had already started to gather my things and was looking forward to leaving.

“Are you free for lunch?” she asked. “We could go to the Chuckbox for burgers. It isn’t too expensive and it’s quick.”

“Sure,” I said. “I love that place.”

I grabbed my purse and we walked out to the parking lot. It was already a hot day and the afternoon monsoon clouds hadn’t yet started to gather. It would be getting hotter as the afternoon went on.

I led the way and walked to my car. When we got there, I saw Danielle’s eyes glance over the scratched paint, the bullet hole, the broken mirror, and the bungee cord.

“Your poor car,” she said. “Someone has been very mean to it.”

“I know it’s not in the best shape, but it still runs great. Well, except the AC went out a few days ago, but it’s not so bad with the windows open.”

I saw Danielle giving me the same look Sophie often gave me. “Or,” I said, “if you’d like, we could take your car.”

“I’m thinking that might be a good idea,” she said. “It’s too hot today to not have air-conditioning. I’m sweating just standing here. My car’s this one over here.”

She pointed a remote at a white Camaro convertible and I heard the locks pop open.

“Wow,” I said, “that’s a nice car.”

“Thank you. Now that I’m living in America, I wanted a convertible, but you should also see the payments. Those aren’t so nice.”

We drove south on Scottsdale Road, across Tempe Town Lake, and onto the campus of Arizona State. We turned left on University and within two minutes, we pulled into the parking lot of the Chuckbox.

I first started going to the Chuckbox back when I was going to school at ASU and now I try to come back at least once a month. The burgers at the

Chuckbox are cooked over an open bed of charcoal and every time I go in, the aroma transports me to my backyard when I was a kid. I can almost see my dad, a beer in one hand, a big metal spatula in the other, flipping patties with a happy grin on his face.

We went through the line, got our burgers, and loaded them up at the condiment table. By mutual consent, Danielle and I splurged and got an order of fries to split.

Once we were settled at a table in the corner, we dug into our lunches. There wasn't a lot of talking, and within fifteen minutes, we were picking at the last of the fries.

"I love coming here," Danielle said. "This place is where I go whenever I want real American food."

I felt a prickling in the back of my neck and I started to get the feeling I was being watched. I casually lifted my head and glanced around the room. Next to the main entrance, two familiar looking men were each holding a soda, but neither seemed to be drinking it. Both of them were casting glances my way.

Damn.

"Are you alright?" Danielle asked. "You look like you've been frightened."

"No, I'm alright. Look, I should probably tell you I have another job. Sometimes in my other job, people end up following me around. There've been three guys following me since last Friday and probably before that. Don't turn and look, but two of them are sitting by the entrance. I guess the other one's in the parking lot."

Danielle had a strange look on her face that I couldn't read. Fortunately, it wasn't panic. More like surprise. Maybe I shouldn't have told her, but I wanted her to be aware in case something happened.

"What should we do?" Danielle asked as she lowered her voice and bent over to be closer to me. Instead of worry, she had the calm voice of a fellow conspirator. "Should we call the police?"

"No. Right now they're only following me. They don't seem to want anything, at least not yet."

“How often do men follow you? Are any of them dangerous?”

“Some are, but I’m hoping these turn out to be some of the harmless ones.”

“What happens if these aren’t some of the harmless ones?”

“Well, you remember my car? That was caused by some of the ones who weren’t so harmless. Well, except for the air conditioner. That gave out on its own.”

“What kind of job do you have where men follow you around and destroy your car?” Danielle asked. “Honestly? If I were you, I’d quit that job and work in our office full-time instead. It might be safer.”

“It’s a long story and I’ll tell you about it someday. But for now, drive me back to my car. I need to see what I can find out about my new friends.”

We walked past the two men and went outside. Sure enough, sitting outside at a table in the shade, was the third man. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him turn his head to follow us as we walked to Danielle’s car. She used the remote to unlock the doors and we got in. I noticed she locked the doors as soon as we sat down.

“Did you see the other man?” she asked.

“He’s sitting at a table on the patio, but it’s okay. He didn’t even bother to get up when we walked past him.”

Danielle started the car and within seconds, the air conditioner was blowing out cold air. She didn’t put the car into gear. Instead, she sat looking out the window. Now that we were safely away from the men, I could tell she was trying to process what had happened. I sometimes forget things like this tend to upset people who aren’t used to them. I knew she’d need a minute to compose herself.

For something to do, I flipped down the visor, pulled out my lipstick, and put some on. I looked at myself in the mirror as I rubbed my lips together. As I did, I looked over and saw Danielle staring at me with the strangest look on her face. I could tell she was still upset and now it was as if she had gone into some sort of a trance.

“It helps,” I said.

Danielle didn’t say anything. She only kept staring at my lips.

“The lipstick,” I said. “It helps keeps my lips from drying out.”

“Ah,” she said, her eyes coming back into focus. “Lipstick.” She still seemed to be thinking about something else, but her attention was slowly coming back. “Um, that’s a good idea,” she said. “The desert climate is hard on my lips, too. Is that the same lipstick you had on the other night? The color seems a little different.”

“No, that was *Passion’s Paradise*. This is *Wet Desire*.”

“I like it,” she said. “It’s a good color for you.”

Danielle put the car into drive and we headed back to Southwest Desert. She didn’t talk on the way back and I knew she was still upset. She pulled into the parking lot next to my car.

“I’m sorry about what happened back there,” I said. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. I don’t think the guys want anything other than to track my movements, but I thought you should know in case something did happen.”

“No, I’m glad you did. It’s better for me to know everything going on around me.”

“I’ll see you Wednesday morning,” I said, trying to sound cheerful.

“Yes, Laura. I’ll see you again soon.”

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Danielle walked into the office while I opened the door to my car and stood for a minute to let it air out. When I figured it had cooled off as much as it was going to, I got in and drove back to the law office.

A block away from Southwest Desert, I looked in the rearview mirror and wasn’t surprised to see a black SUV with the two men in it. The other one must be in a separate car.

My thoughts were going in several directions at once. I had men following me and I had no idea who they were. I still had no clue who was starting the fires at Arizona Transnational. The assumption had been it was someone at Southwest Desert, but it really could have been anyone.

In addition to the fires, I didn’t know how much I wanted to probe into what I found in the trailer on Saturday morning. I had pictures of a dead guy in my phone, but the body was now ashes in the wind. Gina still wanted

me to contact the police, but since there wasn't going to be a body, she wasn't insisting as hard.

Seeing Danielle and that gangster together made me feel a little uneasy. It was strange seeing a bad guy acting politely toward someone, even towards a pretty woman.

On the other hand, Johnny had been spotted, but then he'd disappeared again. Tony had everyone looking for him but so far, no one had a clue where he was.

Mostly what I was thinking about was Max and the promise I'd made to stop seeing Reno and be with him exclusively. Was it only a promise made in the heat of the moment or was this something I really wanted? Could Max and I have a good life together?

*What the hell did I do?*

I parked and went in through the rear security door. The men had followed me into Old Town Scottsdale. They were on my tail until I pulled into the alley behind the law office, then they broke off and sped down the street.

I was happy the SUV hadn't tried to follow me down the back alley. I was even happier when I went into the office and heard the lock on the door snap shut.

Sophie was back from lunch and was working at her desk. I took a sniff but could only smell a faint hint of Amber.

"Is Amber here?" I asked.

"She was here for about two hours, then said she was getting a migraine. She went home to sleep it off. I hope she gets more of those migraines. It's nice to have her gone and watching her suffer was kind of fun. Every time the phone rang, she'd squint her eyes and rub her temples."

"I'm starting to feel a little sorry for her. Being here was her dad's idea and she probably hates coming in as much as we hate having her here. Maybe we could work something out?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Maybe pay her to work out of her house or something. If she could keep from telling her dad, I'm sure Lenny would go for it."

“Well, I’m all for anything that’ll keep her away from me. How’d your date with Max go last night? You let him seduce you this time? He’s been trying since the first time he saw you. If it was me, I’d make him buy dinner first, maybe a few drinks, but then I’d be good with it. That man is gorgeous.”

*Okay, here it goes. Once I say the words, it will become real.*

“Um, I agreed to break it off with Reno to be with him.”

With a huge smile, Sophie stood up, clapped her hands, and started to squeal.

“Seriously? Oh my God! Yes! That’s so wonderful. Gina will shit of course, but she’ll get over it. When are you going to tell Reno? That won’t be easy.”

“I’m not looking forward to that part. We’re meeting at Frankie Z’s Thursday night. I probably won’t ever be able to go in there again, so I guess it’s the right place to do it.”

“What am I going to shit about?” Gina asked as she came out of the conference room.

“Laura’s going to break it off with Reno and start going out with Max.”

Gina frowned at me in disappointment. My mother always gave me the same look when I was a teenager after I’d done something stupid.

“You know I care about you,” Gina said. “My advice is not to rush into anything that can have lifelong consequences. Break up with Reno if you don’t feel he’s the one, but becoming closely involved with a professional criminal will only lead to heartache. Chances are pretty good that Max will end up in prison someday. Do you want to be known as the woman with a boyfriend, or God forbid, a husband, locked up in the penitentiary? Do you want to tell your kids that daddy’s going to prison for a few years?”

“Max is getting out of that side of the business,” I said defensively. “He’s going to be legitimate from now on. He’s thinking about running the new resort Tony and Muffy Sternwood are building in North Scottsdale.”

“You know it doesn’t matter if Max stops his illegal activities and goes legitimate,” Gina said, still sounding like my mother. “Even if he doesn’t ever engage in any new criminal activity, the statute of limitations gives

prosecutors years before they have to file charges against him. You could be married and have three kids when the FBI knocks on your door.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said, “that happened on the show *Orange is the New Black*. They nabbed her for smuggling a suitcase full of drug money and that was years before she even met her husband. It was quite a shock to him when she went off to the penitentiary.” She seemed to get an idea. “You want to borrow my green love stone? I’ve already used it a couple of times, but I’m sure it still has lots of vortex power left in it. You can ask it what to do about Max.”

“I’m okay,” I said. “I’ve pretty much made up my mind on this one and besides I’m still not too sure about crystals and love stones.”

Sophie shrugged her shoulders, as if to say ‘*suit yourself*’.

“All I’m asking is that you think about it,” Gina said as she headed toward the back offices. “Sophie, I’ll be in Goodyear tracking down some leads. Call me if anything comes up.”

“I always do,” Sophie said.

After Gina left, I slumped down into one of the red leather wing chairs next to Sophie’s desk.

“How was your other job today?” she asked. “Did you find out who’s starting fires, running guns, and murdering people?”

“No, and I’m starting to think working in the office over there will be a dead end. Everything criminal happens in the warehouse and I can’t get back there. Although something odd happened today. I can’t shake off the feeling there’s something strange going on with Danielle. I saw her talking with a guy at work today. He was definitely bad news, but he wasn’t treating her like an office manager.”

“How was he treating her?”

“He was treating her with respect. It was weird.”

“Was he one of Carlos’ men?”

“That’s the thing. I don’t remember where I’ve seen him before, but he certainly could be one of the Black Death.”

“Well, that doesn’t seem like Danielle. She’s nice and I can’t see her talking to a goon unless she didn’t know he was a goon. If the place is

crawling with bad guys, she probably can't help but talk with them, at least occasionally."

"I like her, too, and you're probably right."

"You want me to run a quick check on her? See if there's anything suspicious in her background?"

"I'm thinking that'd be a good idea," I said. "Only the standard check. It may be nothing, but coincidences never seem to be coincidences around here."

"True, but how could she be actively working for Carlos? She hardly seems like a thug."

"I don't know," I said. "It just seems weird. Oh, speaking of weird, the guys who were following me on Friday night showed up again. I saw them when Danielle and I were over at the Chuckbox. Two came inside and one stayed in the parking lot."

"Did they do anything?"

"Nope. They each got a soda and then spent ten minutes not drinking them."

"Why are you the one who always gets followed around by the good-looking men? I've been working here for years and nobody ever follows me."

"It's not as much fun as it sounds. It's kind of creepy."

Sophie stopped talking and began staring into space. I've seen her do this many times before when she's working on a thought. After a moment, she came out of it and looked at me. "We've been making the assumption that Southwest Desert is bad news and might have some connections with Carlos the Butcher and the Black Death. Are we sure it's not one of Tough Tony's operations? That could also explain things."

"It could be, but it doesn't feel right. The hoodlum I saw didn't seem like one of Tony's."

"Maybe, but I'm thinking you should ask Max about Southwest Desert the next time you see him. Although I'd ask him before he gets naked. You'll probably forget to ask after he does that."

When Sophie said that, I realized she was probably right. The next time Max and I had a date, I probably would see him naked. And naked would only be the starting point for things that night. As I thought about this, my heart sped up and I couldn't catch my breath.

I looked over and saw Sophie looking back at me.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "Your face has turned red and you're breathing funny."

"I was thinking about seeing Max naked."

"Well, I understand that. The thought of that man naked gives me the quivers."

I went back to my cubicle and collapsed onto my chair. I took out my phone, put it on the desk, and looked down at it.

Was I doing the right thing? Could I really have a future with Max? I got along with Reno better than anyone I'd ever been with. I knew Gina was right about Max; he couldn't just turn off a criminal past. And I had no doubt that Reno loved me. I never thought about Max when I was with Reno, but when I was alone, I couldn't think of anyone but Max.

*Why does this have to be so hard?*

I picked up my phone and called Max. As soon as I heard his deep steady voice, I immediately felt better about my decision.

"Good afternoon," he said. "I'm glad you called. I was thinking about you."

"Do you have any time to meet today? Not as a date, but I have some things I'm trying to figure out and I think you might be able to help."

"I'm not doing anything special tonight and we could make it a date if you would like it to be."

"No, not a date. There're too many things going on now, plus I'm not telling Reno until Thursday. Why don't we make a date for Friday? I think I'm getting close to being done on one assignment. If we can figure out how to get Johnny back by then, I might even have a few days off before I get assigned to anything else."

"Alright, not a date. Where do you want to meet?"

“Let’s keep it simple. I’ll meet you at seven o’clock at the Winchester Saloon. I’d like to see where they took Johnny on Saturday night. We can grab dinner and talk.”

“Alright, I’ll see you then.”

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I went up front and talked with Sophie for a while. We discussed both assignments, but neither of us could come up with a good idea of what to do next. My next move was to talk in person with Manuel at Arizona Transnational. I also wanted to talk with some of the people on the graveyard shift again.

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I drove back home and got cleaned up for my meeting with Max. I kept telling myself it was not a date and I tried my best not to look overly inviting. I knew if we somehow found ourselves alone, there would be kissing, and it would probably turn into a date. I wanted to avoid that until Reno and I were officially over.

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I drove up to the Scottsdale Blue Palms and stopped my car in front of a big map of the resort. The Winchester Saloon was located in a small cluster of shops away from the main hotel and conference center. I drove down a long hill, following the signs for the pro shop.

When I found the right parking lot, I saw it was the main center for golfing at the resort. According to the map, it was the beginning and end for two golf courses. There was the pro shop, a sportswear store, and a gift shop with an ice cream parlor. Next to the pro shop was the Winchester Saloon.

Since the sun was about to set, the parking lot was starting to empty out. Several golfers were walking towards their cars with bags slung over their shoulders. I found a good parking space close to the entrance of the saloon.

Walking in, I saw it was relatively lively for seven at night. Most of the patrons wore golfing outfits and it looked like some of them had been here since the afternoon. The walls were covered with antique golf clubs and pictures of cowboys playing golf. Up-tempo country music played in the background and the smell of beer and barbeque hung in the air.

I recognized the table where Johnny and the goons had been and I went to it. It was in front of a large picture-window looking out at the tee boxes for the first hole on the Maricopa course. The sky outside was bright with the colors of the sunset. I sat and stared out at the beautiful scene.

Three minutes later Max walked in. The two bartenders who had been chatting with each other suddenly remembered there were several things they needed to do and busily started doing them.

Max walked over to my table. Happiness flooded me as I stood and held out my arms toward him. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tightly. As always with Max, I felt safe and loved.

“Somehow I knew you’d be at this table,” he said. “Trying to catch a vibe about what happened the other night?”

As he said it, I could tell something was wrong. My first thought was that something happened to Johnny. Something bad.

“What happened?” I asked as we sat. “Is it Johnny?”

Max shook his head. “No, but it looks like another one of our men has disappeared.”

Shit.

A waitress appeared at the table and Max absently ordered two double Glenlivet scotches with a single ice cube in each.

When she walked back to the bar, I leaned forward. “Tell me about it. When did he disappear?”

“The last time we heard from him was on Wednesday, two days after Johnny vanished. He’s been performing some undercover work for us. He’s been trying to flush out some information about Carlos and the Black Death over the last couple of weeks. There’s still a lot about that organization we don’t know. Of course, we never expected to hear from him every day. He’s often in positions where outside calls would be awkward. But when we didn’t hear from him by Saturday, Tony became concerned. Now it’s Monday and we’re assuming something’s happened.”

Oh no, I think I know what happened to him.

“Laura,” Max said. “Are you alright? You’ve gone pale.”

“Um, your missing man. What does he look like?”

“He’s fairly non-descript. It helps in his line of work. Late thirties, relatively tall, short blond hair.”

“Was he fairly big and muscular?”

“Yes,” Max said. He looked eager which that was unusual for him. “Have you seen him?”

The waitress came back with the drinks. She left quickly as Max looked at her impatiently.

My heart was sinking and I felt like crying as I pulled out my phone and flipped through the pictures until I came to the dead guy in the trailer. Looking around to make sure no one else could see, I showed the picture to Max. “Is this your man?”

Max glanced at the picture, then his eyes opened wide. He took the phone and stared closely at it.

“Do you have any other pictures?” His voice had gone icy cold. I’d never heard that from him before and it was frightening.

“There’re several more. Go ahead and flip through them.”

Max spent several minutes examining the pictures. Both the ones of the body wrapped up in plastic and of the dead man’s face. I was glad I had the scotch in front of me. Sipping it gave me something to do while Max tried to take in what had happened.

“Where did you take these?” he asked.

“I was in a semi-trailer at a company called Southwest Desert Transport early on Saturday morning. Some men put the body in the trailer and I got locked in with him. I didn’t know what else to do, so I took a few pictures for evidence.”

“I need you to erase these pictures and not talk to anyone about this.”

“I take it this was your man?”

“Yes. Do you know what they did with his body?”

“The trailer accidentally caught fire and exploded. The last I saw of it, there wasn’t a lot left.”

I could see several emotions cross Max’s face. Mostly anger, but also concern and disappointment. I’d seen Reno give me the same look many

times before.

“What were you doing at Southwest Desert?” he asked.

“I’m working there undercover. I got a part-time job to learn if they’ve been setting fires at a company called Arizona Transnational.”

Max became very still. He was still speaking normally, but I could tell how upset he was.

“We know Carlos’ main offices are in a business park off Frank Lloyd Wright Boulevard. We strongly suspect Southwest Desert is one of Carlos’ operational hubs, maybe his main one.”

“Well, that explains a lot about what’s been happening there.”

“I don’t need to tell you to never go back there again, do I? If Carlos or one of his men recognizes you and they see you’re spying on them, the results won’t be pretty. You’ve been very lucky so far, but don’t push it. I’ve lost a good man and I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Have you been able to find out anything on Johnny?”

Max sat back with a frustrated look on his face. He picked up his drink and took a long sip of it. “Yes, and everything’s gotten complicated. We’ve formally entered into negotiations with Carlos over how we’re going to *co-exist* together. There’ll be a meeting tomorrow that will hopefully calm things down. Actually, Tony and Carlos have been on the verge of negotiations for weeks. It now seems like the kidnapping of Johnny was Carlos’ way of getting the talks going a little faster. Getting Johnny back will be part of what Tony and Carlos will be discussing.”

“Negotiation doesn’t seem like Tony’s style. I thought he was going to take a hard line with the Black Death.”

“Tony knows what he’s doing. There’ve always been areas we don’t participate in, heroin being a good example. Although profitable, there’s no public tolerance for it, so we stay away. These areas have always been serviced by the small local gangs who are constantly fighting each other. Tony’s often said that at some point someone will come in to consolidate the heroin trade and bring some stability. Maybe this is the time and the Black Death is the group.”

“But Carlos tried to kill Tony and he nearly killed you. How can you negotiate with someone like that?”

“Tony’s always been able to see the broader picture when it comes to business. Don’t worry he won’t do anything stupid. He can’t be intimidated and if there’s no advantage for us, he won’t make a deal. Besides, if Carlos is fighting with the local gangs for control of the heroin trade, it will keep us out of it, at least for a while.”

“It sort of seems like you’re only setting things up for a confrontation later down the road. At some point there can only be one group in control.”

“Perhaps, but that’s sometimes the way of our business. Stability now in exchange for uncertainty later. Of course, the man you found will complicate things. Tony will likely want to retaliate.” He sighed and looked up at me. “Can you see why running a resort sounds like such a good idea? This isn’t the life I would’ve chosen.”

We sat together and talked for another half an hour. The waitress stopped by and asked if we wanted to order anything, but our appetites had disappeared.

Max walked me to my car and gave me a long goodnight kiss. I would have pressed him for more and maybe asked him about our planned date on Friday, but I could see he was still angry and upset over his lost man. I knew it wasn’t the time. I drove straight back to my apartment.

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I took the elevator to my floor. When the doors opened, I heard two men in a loud discussion. As I walked down the hall, I saw Grandpa Bob and Ray. They were standing close to each other and Bob was waving his finger in Ray’s face. Bob was declaring that Mary was his girl and that Ray needed to scram. The new guy said that Mary didn’t have a ring on her finger and she could date anyone she wanted to.

I tried to make myself inconspicuous as I walked past the two men, their discussion on the verge of becoming an argument. The door to Grandma’s apartment opened and she stuck her head out.

“Land sakes,” she said. “I can’t hear the TV with you two going on out here. I want you both to shake hands and be off. I’ll decide if I want to date

either one of you again. I've got another dozen men in my email inbox who want to date me, and most of them still have their teeth and hair."

She disappeared back into her apartment and closed her door. The two men looked at the door and then at each other. They both started grumbling about dames and turned to walk toward the elevator. I opened the door to my apartment and went in.

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At eleven fifteen, I drove back to Arizona Transnational. Manuel was in the guard shack studying calculus. When I came in, he brightened.

"Hey," he said. "Last night was sort of exciting around here. It was about three thirty when one of the guys spotted the fire out back. After it was put out, we reviewed the videos. The guy stood at the back fence and tossed the firebomb at one of the trailers, but it fell a little short. All it did was catch a pile of pallets on fire. They put it out and I called the police."

"Thanks for sending the videos. I took a look at them and you're right. All it shows is the profile of the car and the outline of the person."

"When the police came, we gave them copies of the videos. But since they don't show the guy's face or the license plate of the car, I'm not sure it will help.

I thanked him and went inside. I walked back to the shipping clerk's office where Jessie Santos was at her desk, sorting through a stack of forms.

"Hi, Jessie," I said. "Do you have a minute?"

"On the graveyard shift, there's always time," she said with a laugh.

"When we talked the other night, you said several months ago you dated a guy called Lew Lockridge who worked at Southwest Desert. You said you went out with him five or six times. You also said he had a temper."

"That's right," she said. "Lew's temper was the main reason I stopped seeing him. I hate being around negative people."

"Do you recognize this car?"

I pulled out the picture I had printed from the surveillance video. It showed the profile of a white Mustang.

"That looks like Lew's car."

“We have evidence he’s the one who’s been starting the fires here. Do you know why he would do that?”

“I might. I talked with Lindsay last night. The guy he got into the fight with in the bar a few weeks ago sounded a lot like Lew. Like I said, he’s kind of a mean person and I wouldn’t put it past him to want to stir things up. I wasn’t sure if I should tell anyone or not. I don’t want to get into trouble over this.”

I thanked her and walked back to my car. It looked like I’d solved the mystery of the fires, but I wanted to discuss this with Lenny before I officially told anyone at Arizona Transnational.

On the drive back to my apartment, I was feeling vaguely down about the assignment. I had been hoping for something more than a jealous ex-boyfriend but it looked like that’s all it was.

Chapter Twelve

When I woke up, it was already after eight. I had forgotten to set the alarm the night before when I came back from Arizona Transnational. After a quick shower and two cups of coffee, I decided to call Lenny. I know I should have gone into the office and talked to him directly, but I've learned it's usually better to give him bad news over the phone. I typically get less of a lecture that way.

I called Sophie at work and asked how Lenny's mood was. She said it sucked but no worse than usual. I then had her ring his phone. When he answered, I could tell Sophie had been right about his mood.

"What?" he asked as Sophie transferred the phone.

"I've got the trucking company thing figured out."

"And?"

"And it's nothing. There's a truck driver at Southwest Desert named Lew Lockridge. A few months ago, he dated a woman named Jessie Santos. She's the night shipping clerk for our client. I guess Lew still has a crush on her and he's pissed because she's dating someone new, a driver at Arizona Transnational named Lindsay Mills. The two guys got into a fight in a bar about a month ago. I think Lew's been starting fires where Jessie works, just to be an ass."

"So, we're only talking about simple arson? No conspiracy to commit insurance fraud? No industrial intimidation? No blackmail? No extortion?"

"Yup, nothing more than simple arson by a jealous ex-boyfriend."

"Shit. I was hoping to get more out of this one. Alright, come in and work with Sophie to put together the report. Have her set up a meeting with Mike Malloy, so we can go over the evidence in person. We can turn everything over to the police and let them handle it. What about Tough Tony's man? Where are you on that?"

Damn, how much do I tell Lenny?

"I met with my DiCenzo contact last night. They have a lead on Johnny and they should have some more information on him later today."

“What about this lead? Is it a good lead? Is this something you can assist with?”

“Um, that’s about all I have on it.”

“Look, you found out Johnny Scarpazzi was alive and is likely being held in or near Scottsdale on Sunday. Now it’s Tuesday and you’re no closer to finding him. Don’t be passive on this one. Don’t wait on someone else to do your job for you. Go out and make something positive happen. Call me when you know more.”

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I drove to the office and was relieved when Lenny’s Porsche was nowhere to be seen. I dropped off my purse in my cubicle and walked up front to talk with Sophie.

As soon as I walked into the front offices, the stench of Amber’s camel-pee perfume hit me. I hadn’t seen her car in the parking lot, but she’d definitely been in the room, within the past half-hour judging by the residual stink.

“Hey, girlfriend,” Sophie said when she saw me. “Now don’t get me wrong, I understand why you wanted to call Lenny with the bad news about the trucking company, rather than come in and tell him yourself. But keep in mind that when you do that, he comes out here and bitches to me about it. I had to listen to him complain for almost ten minutes before he took off. I think he went to get another pack of cigarettes. You know, for someone who’s trying to quit smoking, he’s doing a crappy job.”

“I’m sorry you got bitched at. I never want him to take it out on you, but whenever I give him bad news in person, he lectures me for fifteen or twenty minutes.”

“Does he get that pulsing vein thing in his forehead with you?”

“Yeah, isn’t it gross?”

“I can’t look at it without getting nauseous,” Sophie said. “Anyway, don’t worry about it. Calming Lenny and listening to him grumble seems to be a big part of this lousy job. I’ve already started putting together the report on Arizona Transnational and I have a message in to Mike Malloy to set up a meeting for tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Did Lenny tell you it’s a jealous ex-boyfriend starting the fires? I’ll fill you in with the final details and we can attach copies of the videos.”

“Yup, Lenny told me, several times. Oh, I have some bad news about Johnny. You aren’t going to like this much either. When I got in today, the search program had another hit. He’s got a new deposit from Escobar Salazar, this time for a hundred thousand dollars.”

“How’s that bad news? He’s been getting these deposits for two or three months.”

“Well, the deposit came from the same company as before, but this time it went directly into one of Johnny’s brokerage accounts, not one of his secret ones. There wasn’t any attempt to hide the deposit or where it came from. Tony’s monitoring Johnny’s accounts. By now, he’ll know the Black Death is paying Johnny off.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Why would they pay him to be a secret informant, then let everyone know he was a snitch?”

“Maybe Carlos and Escobar want Johnny to be outted. I don’t imagine Tony will welcome him back with open arms after he finds out. Maybe this is Carlos’ way of getting rid of Johnny without doing it himself?”

“I’ll need to talk to Max and see what they know. Where’s Amber? I smell her, but I don’t see her.”

“I sent her down to get some more office supplies. She’s doused herself with that camel shit again and I almost lost it when she first came in. I keep coming up with excuses to get her out of the office, but we’ve now got an entire supply room full of paper, pens, toner cartridges, and file folders. I’m going to need to come up with another way of getting rid of her. Oh, speaking of that...” She pulled a document off her desk and handed it to me.

“What’s this?”

“It’s the letter of resignation and release of liability form Lenny had me type up. He went over it and says it’s solid. If we can get Amber to sign it, we’ll be in the clear. Lenny wants all three of us to carry one at all times.”

I took the document, folded it twice, and put it in my back pocket behind my phone.

“What about Max,” Sophie asked. “How’d your date go last night?”

“It wasn’t a date.”

“So, you didn’t get to see him naked yet?”

“Not yet.”

“You know I’ll want a full report when you do see him naked. That man has big hands and long shoes. I’ll want to know if we’re talking about a matched set or not.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll get a full report. Well, maybe you’ll get a full report. Do you want to hear what he said or not?”

“Sorry, I was curious. Shoot me. What did Max say?”

“Max confirmed Carlos has Johnny. He also said Southwest Desert is an operational center for the Black Death, maybe even the main one. The dead guy I found in the trailer was one of Tony’s. He was supposed to be checking out Carlos and they must have spotted him.”

“No shit. And you spent two mornings over at Southwest Desert? It’s a good thing you weren’t spotted, too. You must have angels looking after you. It does explain the whole dead guy and army supplies in the trailer thing.”

“We’ve got to figure out what to do about Danielle. Southwest isn’t a good place for her to be working. Has the report on her come back yet? What did it show?”

“Well, it came back, but it didn’t show anything.”

I was relieved to hear that. “Good, I’d hate to think she could be involved in something with Carlos.”

“No, I mean nothing.”

“What? Like she has a spotless record?”

“Nope. Nothing as in nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“At first I thought there were too many Danielle Ortega’s in the system and the database was confused. Remember last year when we tried looking up that Nancy Smith bimbo and the computer couldn’t decide who was who? This time, I think the computer found the right person, but she has no

records. No current address, no previous addresses, no criminal history, no credit history, no immigration status, and no employment history. It's like she's managed to stay out of the system her whole life."

"Is it possible she's an illegal and doesn't have a history?"

"No, I see illegals all the time. They sometimes have better credit than the people who were born here."

"But she works at Southwest Desert. That *has* to show up."

"Nope, no record of her working anywhere."

"Well, damn."

"You want me to do a deep dive?" Sophie asked.

"Maybe, but not yet. I don't want to snoop on a friend unless I have to."

"Good. I've been waiting for the men-in-black to come busting in here and erase my memory. At some point, they're going to get pissed because of all the database searches I've been running. By the way, if that happens, I'll be so angry at you."

"Ha, if they wipe your brain, you won't remember it was me who asked you to do the searches in the first place."

"I don't know. I'll try really hard to remember it was your fault. That way I'll have one more thing to hold over your head for the rest of your life."

My phone started playing the theme to *The Love Boat*. Sophie laughed and started making kissy noises. I answered, then went into the main conference room and closed the door.

"Laura," Max said. "Forgive me for calling you while you're working, but this is important. I know you have no reason ever to go back to the place we talked about last night, but knowing you, I thought I needed to give you a call. I can't give you the details, but you don't want to be over there this afternoon. Are we clear? Don't be there this afternoon."

"Okay, I got that. Don't be at Southwest Desert this afternoon."

"Thank you," Max said. "This is going to be a busy day for me and I don't want to be worried about you as well."

"Nope, you don't have to worry about me. Not at all. Not even a little bit."

“Good. Thank you for helping me with this.”

“Um, have your guys found anything new on Johnny with the computer searches?”

“I haven’t checked in with the team on that today. As I mentioned, there’s a lot going on today and we already know Johnny’s being held by Carlos. Have you found anything new?”

“Um, maybe. Let’s talk about it after you get Johnny back.”

“It’s a deal,” he said. “By the way, I’m looking forward to our Friday night. It’ll be wonderful having the entire evening with you. I was thinking dinner somewhere romantic, then we could go to my place and perhaps share a bottle of champagne I’ve been saving.”

A shiver went through my body as the evening played out in my mind.

“That sounds perfect,” I said. “I can’t wait.”

I disconnected, then went back to reception and plopped down in one of the wing chairs.

“Why the weird face?” Sophie asked. “Talking with Max usually perks you up. And you’re blushing. Did you ask him about the payoff?”

“I started to, but I somehow got the feeling I shouldn’t be the one to bring him the bad news. Besides, he was talking about a date we’ve set up for Friday. A real date ending with champagne over at his place.”

“Well, that’s good, right?”

“Oh, yeah. That part’s great.”

“But?”

“But last night Max said Tony’s having a meeting with Carlos today. One of the things they’ll be negotiating for is Johnny’s release. From the way he talked a few minutes ago, there’s a strong possibility the meeting won’t go well. Max implied Tony’s going to hit Southwest Desert this afternoon. They’d only do that if the negotiations fell apart. Max warned me to stay away.”

“Negotiating for Johnny’s release should be straight-forward. What could go wrong?”

“It could be anything. Maybe Tony’s already found out Johnny’s the snitch or maybe Carlos is just a sneaky bastard and the whole thing is a ruse and an ambush.”

“Okay, but you weren’t ever going back to Southwest Desert anyway, were you?”

“I wasn’t, but I need to get Danielle out. It’s possible nothing will happen, but I can’t take a chance of her getting hurt.”

We heard Gina and Amber talking in the back offices. After a minute, Amber walked into reception. She was carrying a sack full of file folders and three-ring binders. Within seconds, the smell of wet camel filled the office. Sophie quickly asked her to take the office supplies into the storage room to add to the collection.

“Are you going over to get Danielle soon?” Sophie asked. I could see her eyes had already started to tear-up from Amber’s perfume.

“Yeah, I thought I’d start by asking her to lunch. Once I get her away, I can explain things. I don’t have to explain everything, but I’m sure I can keep her away from her office for the afternoon, even if I have to make up something about an emergency. Hopefully I can also convince her to start looking for a new job right away.”

“Good, take Amber with you. She really doused herself with that pee perfume today and my head’s spinning.”

I gave Sophie my best “*Are you kidding me?*” look.

“Don’t give me that look,” Sophie said. “You still owe me big time. First was the pregnancy rumor, then Lenny this morning, and don’t forget about the possibility that I might have my brain erased because of you.”

“Fine, but this will even up everything, even if you do get brain damage.” I thought about it for a minute. “I’ll see if she’ll drive. It’s getting hot outside and air-conditioning would be nice.”

The door to the back offices opened and Gina walked into reception. “Hey, Laura,” she said. “I heard you solved the mystery fires at the trucking company. Too bad it’s nothing Lenny can go to court over. That would’ve kept him busy for weeks.”

“Well, it’s almost over,” I said. “I have one more thing to clear up this afternoon. We also know what happened to Johnny. Carlos the Butcher has him. Tony’s negotiating today to get him back.”

Gina stiffened and I could almost hear her thoughts before she spoke. “Are you going to be involved with that?”

“No, I’m letting that one go on all by itself.”

Gina relaxed and even cracked a smile. “Good. Well, I’ll be here all afternoon, call me if you need any help with anything.”

Amber came in from the storage room and the camel smell kicked up a notch. I saw Sophie looking at me with a *hurry-up* look on her face.

“Hey, Amber,” I said. “I’m going out to lunch with a friend, then I’ll be working on one of my assignments for the afternoon. Why don’t you come along?”

“Really?” she asked. “Oh, that would be great. Working all day in an office is so boring, you know?”

“Let me set up our lunch appointment, then we can go. Would it be okay if we take your car?”

“Yeah, that would be a good idea. My car’s new and everything still works. I heard your air-conditioning’s broken. That really sucks.”

I went back to my cubicle and made the call. “Hey, Danielle,” I said when she answered. “It’s Laura. I’d like to take you to lunch today.”

“Hello, Laura. I don’t know if I can go. Phyllis and Irene are both off today for a funeral. I’m here by myself and I’m doing everything.”

“Well, I also really need to talk to you. Something important has come up.”

“What is it? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, but something might happen today and I need to take you to lunch and talk about it.”

“Okay, Laura, I suppose I can do lunch, but then I need to get back. I’m going to have a very busy afternoon.”

I went to reception and got Amber. After I grabbed my purse, we went out the back, and got into her Mazda. She was right about everything being

new and working. I felt a pang of jealousy when she turned on the satellite radio and another one when she put the SUV into reverse and a backup camera lit up a big screen in her dashboard. I told her how to get to Southwest Desert and she took off.

“You’re wearing a lot of perfume today,” I said as we drove. “Is something special going on?”

“I know. I put on extra today. I hope it didn’t bother Sophie or the baby too much, but I met with a new guy for breakfast today. He’s the night manager at a strip club and he was just getting off of work. I wanted to unload both barrels on him to keep him in the right frame of mind.”

“Did it work?”

“Oh yeah. We’re meeting for dinner tomorrow night. He wanted me to give him a blow job in the parking lot, but I told him no sex until we had a proper date.”

“No sex until an actual date seems like a good rule to me.”

“Oh, I didn’t mind that he asked for a blow job,” she said. “I knew it wasn’t his fault. It’s the perfume. It makes guys horny and they can’t help themselves. If you’d like I could send you the link for the perfume shop website. You could get yourself a bottle and use it whenever a guy is playing hard to get.”

*Oh yuck. Gross.*

“Okay, I’m not sure I’ll get any, but go ahead and send the link. Maybe I’ll need it someday.”

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As we got closer to Southwest Desert, I called Danielle and asked her to meet us in the parking lot. I thought we’d be safe enough if we didn’t get out of the car or go into the office.

Amber pulled into the parking lot and Danielle was standing next to the guard shack. She hopped in the back seat and Amber took off. I felt a sense of relief as we pulled away.

I introduced Danielle to Amber. I saw Danielle wrinkle her nose as she got her first good whiff of the perfume.

I told Amber to drive north on Hayden. I didn't have a particular destination in mind. I'd been thinking I could explain what was going on to Danielle and we could go to one of the resorts. Maybe sit at a poolside bar for the afternoon until it was safe for Danielle to go back and get her car. I knew she'd have a lot of questions, and a nice tropical setting along with a few drinks might make things easier for her.

"There're some things I need to tell you," I said as I turned in my seat to look back at Danielle. "The first thing is, my real job is an investigator at a law office here in Scottsdale. We were hired last week to look into some fires being set at a trucking company in North Scottsdale. Your company was mentioned as a possible culprit. I went to Southwest Desert last Wednesday morning to see what I could learn. That's when you found me looking in the guard shack. It turns out Southwest Desert is the operations center for a very big and very mean drug syndicate out of Mexico. That's what's been going on out in the warehouse. This syndicate has been in a low-level war with a local crime organization for months. Unfortunately, the war might turn ugly today and if it does Southwest Desert will be the target."

"Wow," Danielle said. "How do you know all this and why are you telling me?"

"How I know is a long story, but I wanted to get you out before any shooting started."

Danielle gave me a look that was very hard to read. I could see she was upset, but I didn't see the confusion I had expected. "That was very sweet of you to think of me," she said. "I honestly do appreciate it."

As she was talking, I looked out the back window. Thirty yards behind us was a black SUV with the same two guys who had been following me since dinner on Friday. Next to them was another SUV. This one had three more men, one of whom I recognized as the guy from the patio at the Chuckbox.

"Damn," I said.

"What?" Danielle asked.

"The guys from the Chuckbox are following me again only now there's two more. They're in a pair of black SUV's."

“We have men following us?” Amber asked with a trace of panic in her voice. “Oh, that sucks.”

“I think it’s okay,” I said. “Men sometimes follow me. I don’t think these guys actually want anything. They’ve only been tracking my movements for the past few days.”

“Tell me more about the attack on Southwest Desert today,” Danielle said. “Do you know when it will happen or how many men will be there? Are they going to blow the place up or shoot the people inside? Maybe go through the warehouse and set fires and steal everything?”

“No, that’s all I know. We’ll need to lay low until you can go back tonight and get your car. It’s possible nothing will happen, but it would be too dangerous to try to go back this afternoon in case something does. We’ll also need to get you a new job somewhere safe. It shouldn’t be hard. You have a lot of skills. Maybe we can even find you one that pays better.”

Danielle still had that strange look on her face, more angry than anything else. She held one of her hands over her head with her fingers spread open. That seemed odd and I was about to ask her about it when Amber gave a small scream.

One of SUV’s had gunned its engine and zoomed past us. The SUV then pulled in front of Amber’s car and immediately started to slow. The second SUV pulled up next to Amber. We looked out the window to see a man leveling a pistol at Amber and motioning her to pull over.

“Oh my God, oh my God!” Amber shouted as she yanked her car into a parking lot and slammed on her brakes.

Both SUV’s came to a stop. One in front of Amber’s Mazda, the other one close behind, effectively blocking us in. All five men got out and I saw four of them were armed with pistols. They motioned for us to get out and we slowly climbed from the car.

The man who seemed to be the leader motioned for Danielle to get into one SUV and for Amber and me to get into the other. I thought about the Baby Glock in my purse, but I didn’t want to get into a shootout with four armed men, especially with Danielle and Amber in the middle.

As if reading my thoughts, the nearest goon grabbed my purse and quickly went through it. He pulled out my gun and handed my bag back to

me. I pulled the strap over my head so the purse hung against my side. The man looked at my tiny gun, then sneered as he slipped it into his pocket. He then went through Amber's purse and removed her cell phone.

The two of us got in and the guy closed the door. Unfortunately, the back of the SUV was set up like a police car. There was thick wire mesh between the back seat and the two men sitting in front. I tried the doors, but they wouldn't open from the inside. There was even wire mesh over the sides and back, which meant we couldn't break a window and escape that way.

I had a very bad feeling as they drove us north. Max said Carlos had his headquarters in an industrial park off Frank Lloyd Wright Boulevard and that seemed to be where we were heading.

Amber looked to be in shock. Her eyes were glassy and she was making little whining noises and whimpers. The other SUV was ahead of us and I couldn't see Danielle. I hoped she was going to be alright. I've been kidnapped more than once and I'm sort of used to it, but I knew she must have been terrified.

The guys in the front weren't paying any attention to us in the back. I carefully pulled the phone out of my back pocket and hit the button for Gina. I put it on speakerphone and used my thumb to turn the volume down so her voice wouldn't be heard. I then partially hid the phone on the seat so it wouldn't be seen if the men turned to look at us. When I heard the faint sounds of Gina answering, I loudly asked the men why they had kidnapped us and where they were taking us.

"You'll find out when we get there," the man on the passenger's side said without even turning his head.

"Are you taking us to the Black Death headquarters on Frank Lloyd Wright Boulevard?" I loudly asked.

"Shut up," the man said. He then turned and pointed his pistol at me through a hole in the wire mesh screen. "Any more talking and I'll shoot you in the face. Understand?"

I nodded my head and did my best to look scared. It wasn't hard to do since my level of concern was rapidly rising. Satisfied, the man turned back around.

When she saw the pistol, Amber started to lose it. She began to cry making loud moaning sounds and sucking in gulps of air between sobs. The man turned and pointed his gun at her, but that only made Amber scream and then cry harder. At last, the man gave up and turned around, ignoring her.

Without disconnecting, I slid the phone into my back pocket. I knew I still had the *find-my-phone* app turned on from when I was stuck on the hill in the desert. As long as I had my phone with me, both Gina and Sophie could easily track my exact location.

We turned east on Frank Lloyd Wright Boulevard and five minutes later we turned into a business and light industrial park. It was rather shabby and run down, some of the buildings obviously empty and the rest looking dirty and grungy. We pulled into the parking lot of one of the bigger businesses. It had an office section attached to what looked like a manufacturing warehouse.

Our SUV came to a stop and one of the men got out and opened our door. His pistol was pointed at me as we slowly climbed out. The other man was also out and he firmly grabbed my arm. They escorted us to the front entrance of the offices. When they opened the door, I expected it to be full of workers, but no one was visible. There were cubicles and offices full of personal possessions, but everyone must have been given the day off.

The two men walked us down a hallway and into a small conference room. Sitting at a chair and calmly waiting for us was a man I instantly recognized. When I saw him, my heart dropped and I knew this would be nothing but trouble. Here was the guy I'd sprayed in the face with the wasp killer, who'd tried to kill me with a hatchet, and who'd set off the cake bomb at Danica's wedding. I'd been in two fights with him and I knew there was no love lost between us.

Shit.

When he saw the look of shock on my face, he smiled. It was a nasty and wicked smile that made him look both ugly and cruel.

With the two men holding my arms so I couldn't move, the man walked over and grabbed a fistful of my hair. He painfully twisted his hand until my head was bent to the side and I was forced to look at his ugly face. One side

was still purple from the wasp killer I sprayed at him. His eye on that side was still bloodshot.

“We meet again, huh? Maybe you didn’t expect to see me so soon? You know, I don’t think we’ve ever been properly introduced. My name is Raul. Raul of the *Muerte Negro*. I certainly know who you are, Laura Black. I’ve stayed up nights hoping I would meet you again. I bet you thought it was pretty funny when you sprayed that shit in my face. Does it make you laugh when you think about me almost losing my eye? I could see how much fun you were having when you attacked me when I was trying to set off my little bomb. Well, what about now, bitch? Are you still having fun? You don’t know how much I’m looking forward to paying you back for everything you’ve done to me. I’m going to take you to a special little room we have here and then I’m going to cut you. I’m going to take my time and laugh in your face as I watch you bleed.”

Raul released me and walked over to Amber. She was standing by herself and looked very scared. He looked at her for a few seconds, then grabbed her by the back of her head and roughly kissed her. She yelled and tried to pull away, but this only seemed to encourage him. The other men in the room laughed at her ineffective struggles. “Oh, you smell like sex, chica,” Raul said. “After I’m done with that bitch over there, you and me are going to get together for some personal party time.” He grabbed his crotch and laughed. “When I’m done, you’ll finally know what it’s like to be with a real man.”

We were then marched out of the conference room. The two men held my arms while Raul led Amber. We walked down a grimy hallway and stopped in front of some sort of industrial storeroom. Raul opened the door and shoved Amber in. She stood there and whimpered while he closed the door. He slid a large sliding bolt on the outside of the door into place. There was a light switch next to the door and Raul flipped it off. From inside the storage room, Amber let out a small scream and then started crying. Hearing her misery made Raul laugh.

“Don’t worry, baby,” Raul said to Amber through the door. “I’ll be back for you real soon. I want you to think about how good it’s going to be for both of us.”

The men then led me down another hallway, this one much nicer. We ended up in a large and elegant conference room, complete with wood paneling and oil paintings. Sitting at the head of a conference table and surrounded by several other men was a man I knew all too well. I had escaped from him once before, but just barely. This man was Carlos “the Butcher” Valentino, Arizona leader of the *Muerte Negro* or in English, the Black Death.

Carlos was smoking a thick cigar and had a snifter of brandy in front of him. He was apparently in the middle of a meeting with his staff. He completely ignored me as he gave orders to his men. Raul made me stand at the back of the conference room and wait.

Carlos pointed his cigar to one of the bigger hoodlums. This one was blond and appeared to be local. “Vincent,” Carlos said, “Take your squad over to Southwest Desert. We have word Tony will raid the place today if things fuck up here. Keep your troops well hidden. If Tony’s boys show up, let them come all the way inside then open up on them with everything you have. Show them no mercy. Make sure no one’s left alive.”

Vincent laughed and said he couldn’t wait to take out a few of Tough Tony’s boys. Carlos then pointed to another goon, an older one with a thick black mustache and a scarred face. “Sergio, when the meeting with Tony starts, have your men bring Johnny out. Make sure he’s cuffed and keep the leg-irons on him. Keep in mind he put two of our guys in the hospital after we brought him back from the bar Saturday night. I don’t want an incident during the meeting. Make sure to have three stun guns on him at all times. Make it easy for Tony to see we have his pet and that he’s okay. I also want you to get a baseball bat. A big wooden bat, not some cheap aluminum crap. If things don’t go right in our meeting today, we can all take a turn on him. Then we’ll dump him on Tough Tony’s doorstep. He’ll need to learn what happens if he tries to fuck with me.”

Carlos paused to take a sip of his brandy and puff on his cigar.

“Now, I don’t know if Tony will make any concessions for us in the heroin business or not, at least in this meeting. Personally, I doubt it. His only purpose may be to get Johnny back. None of that’s important. What counts today is that Tony suspects there’s a rat in his organization and we’ve done a lot of work to convince him it’s Johnny. Once Johnny’s dead,

Tony will relax his guard and our inside man will be able to operate freely. Maybe our man can even take Johnny's place as Tony's driver. I'll know every move Tony makes. I'll be able to kill Tony any time I want. Not even that psycho-freak Gabriella will be able to protect her boss from his own driver. On the other hand, if Tony convinces me to give Johnny back today, he may regret his decision. Johnny knows what happens to a rat. It's possible he'll kill Tony and the rest of them in an effort to save himself. There'll be carnage and civil war over there. Either way, we come out the winner."

One of the men said something in Spanish that made the other men in the room laugh. It was a very evil sound. Carlos asked for questions and no one said anything.

"Alright," Carlos said. "Bring in Tony's boy. I want to have a little chat with him before Tony gets here."

One of the men scurried out of the room and two minutes later Johnny Scarpazzi was led into the room. His hands were cuffed to a chain around his waist and his feet were shackled together so he could only make small shuffling movements as he walked. Two men led him in and two men walked behind him. Three carried long Billy clubs and one of the men behind him pointed a stun gun at the middle of Johnny's back.

As Johnny walked in, I felt a surge of hope upon seeing him alive. He looked over and his eyes locked onto mine. As I looked closer, I saw a deep bruise on one side his face. My heart went out to him over his brutal treatment.

The men brought Johnny to a halt fifteen feet from where Carlos was sitting. Carlos looked up at Johnny and calmly took a sip of brandy and puffed for a minute on his cigar.

"Johnny," Carlos said, "I like you. You're a brave man. You've handled yourself well the past few days. By now, you must realize why I had to abduct you. The talks between Tony and me over the heroin trade have stalled and I needed something to get them going again. You came sniffing around here a few months ago, so we've made you rich in exchange for the little trinkets of information you've been feeding us. As we've discussed, Tony suspects someone in his organization has been leaking information to us. Up until now, he's had no idea who it was. Unfortunately, I've heard

Tony was recently able to trace the money we sent to you. When you go back to him, Tony will know in his heart that you are the traitor. He will outwardly continue to treat you as a friend, but you'll find yourself excluded from the inner circle and you'll be under constant surveillance. Once he believes he's learned all he can about your treachery, Tony will have you executed. The only way for you to survive will be to remove Tony and take over yourself. I know you hate us, but I also know you are a reasonable man. Once you are head of Tony's organization, we'll do business together. It's as simple as that. Now, it's likely we'll release you today and you'll return to Tony. On the surface, the incident will seem to be over, but I sincerely hope you'll think about what I've said."

Carlos waved Johnny away and the men led him back out of the conference room. Carlos dismissed the rest of his staff who took off to carry out their orders. It was only then that Carlos turned to look at me. I saw the hatred grow as he looked at me without speaking. He took a puff on his cigar then started talking.

"So, Laura Black, you had to interfere one last time. Well, you see, I've finally figured it out. It's always been you. You're the one who's been fucking up everything for me since I got here."

As he talked, he pointed the smoking cigar at me and used it to stab the air with each point he made. The more he talked, the louder and angrier he got.

"You were there when we kidnapped Jackie Wade. You almost blinded Raul with that fucking can of wasp spray. You were there when my beautiful car blew up. You were there when the police seized my heroin and arrested my men. You were the one who kept me from messing up DiCenzo's face with my little cake bomb." As he talked, his face turned red. He then stood up and started yelling. "You stole the document that would have given me ownership of the Saguaro Sky Resort, something that was rightfully owed to me by that asshole Roger Wade. Now I've heard you were the one who blew up my truckload of guns and ammunition. What the hell is wrong with you?"

He stood there and stared at me. His face was still red and he was breathing hard. After a moment, he seemed to calm himself somewhat. He

puffed a few times on his cigar and took a large gulp of his brandy. He then looked directly at me with cold hatred.

“At first,” he said, “I couldn’t figure out if you were DiCenzo’s spy or merely bad luck for me. Either way, I’m going to let Raul take care of you so you won’t ever be able to fuck up anything for me again. He doesn’t like you and he’s going to spend all night cutting you. I promise it will be slow and quite painful. It won’t bring back my car or my money, but I’ll sleep better knowing how much you suffered.”

Carlos dismissed me with a disgusted gesture. The two men half lifted me and took me out of the room. Raul led the way down another hallway, through a door, and into a dirty machine shop. I saw several large industrial machines and racks of metal components. I couldn’t tell what the business produced. Maybe some sort of metal cabinets.

Towards the back of the shop was an unpainted cinderblock wall. In the center of the wall was a gray metal door with a sliding bolt on it. Raul slid back the lock and opened the door. The men then dragged me inside.

The room wasn’t large, maybe twelve feet by fifteen with a low ceiling. The walls were covered with a thick industrial padding that would act to soundproof the room. The floor was bare concrete with a large drain in the middle. A water hose was coiled on a hook on the far wall. A bench along another wall was covered with hand tools. There were pliers, clamps, metal hooks, knives, and a cordless drill with a thin discolored bit in it. There was a motor bolted to the ceiling, a thick chain hanging down from it.

I again tried to struggle and kicked out at the men, but they were too strong. Raul took a piece of rope from the bench and securely tied my hands together. The two goons effortlessly took my hands and held them over my head. They positioned me under the motor and Raul attached the end of the chain to the rope holding my wrists together. One of the other goons used another piece of rope to tie my ankles together.

They released me and out of instinct, I lunged at Raul. I wasn’t sure what I could do, but I wanted to knock him over and let him know he hadn’t intimidated me. Unfortunately, the chain wasn’t long enough for me to hop more than a couple of feet before I was pulled up short.

Raul chuckled to himself as he walked to a switch panel on the wall. He pressed a button, triggering the sound of a motor, and then the chain slowly

started to rise. It pulled painfully up on my hands and arms until it started to lift me off the floor. Raul hit the button again and the motor stopped. My heels were now about two inches off the floor and it felt like my arms were being pulled out of their sockets. I was forced to rise up on my toes to relieve the pressure.

Raul stood back and looked at me. He was enjoying the look of pain on my face. "Is that uncomfortable?" he asked. "It must hurt to hang like that. Be glad I didn't use cuffs on your wrists. They hurt more, but people tend to bleed from the metal cutting into their flesh. I want you to be perfect when I start on you. Well, don't go anywhere, bitch. We're going to have a little meeting with Tough Tony, then I'll be back. I'm going to slice up your face. I'm going to cut you until there's nowhere left to cut. I want you to think about that. Think about what you've done to me and about how much I will hurt you in return."

Raul and the goons walked out of the room and the bolt was slid home with an ominous. The room became very quiet as I hung there and awaited my fate.

Chapter Thirteen

I dangled from the chain for almost half an hour. I could hear the faint sounds of men talking outside the room, but with the soundproofing, I wasn't able to hear anything clearly.

My arms and shoulders throbbed painfully and my legs were cramping from trying to push up enough with my toes to relieve the pressure. I was getting lightheaded from the pain, but I knew if I passed out, Raul would only come in later and slap me awake.

Suddenly, there was a loud metallic clank as the bolt on the door was unlocked. My heart went into panic mode and I knew this could only mean Raul was back and my time was up. The door slowly opened and to my surprise Danielle walked in.

She was alone and once inside, she turned and closed the door. She looked at me with concern when she saw how I was being held by the chain and the rope around my wrists.

Happiness flooded through me. "The switch to lower the chain is on the wall over there," I said and pointed my head to the far wall. "It's one of those buttons. Hurry."

Danielle walked to the switch and studied the buttons. "How did you get away?" I asked as she tried to figure out which one would work to lower the chain.

She reached up and hit a button. The chain started to lower and I felt an immediate sense of relief as my feet sank all the way to the floor and the pressure on my arms was released.

Danielle hit the button again and the motor stopped.

"Keep going," I said. "The chain isn't low enough for me to get it off my wrists."

Instead of lowering the chain further, she walked over and looked at me. I could see her trying to compose her thoughts.

"Laura, I'm sorry to see how cruelly they're treating you, but I can't help you escape."

“What are you talking about? These aren’t nice people. We need to get out of here, right away.”

Danielle looked horribly sad. “When you called me today and said something was going to happen, I had to find out what you knew. You told me Tough Tony was going to attack Southwest Desert if the talks break down today. I thank you for the information. Now if they try to attack, we will surely kill them all.”

My mind was racing with confusion. None of this made any sense. “But the men in the black SUV kidnapped you,” I said. “I saw it. You were being held prisoner, too.”

Danielle walked closer to me. Instead of sounding angry, she talked in a very calm and friendly voice, as if we were two friends discussing old boyfriends over drinks.

“The men who’ve been following you since we went to dinner last Friday night are my bodyguards. They weren’t following you. They were following me. They’re with me wherever I go. What you saw today was my bodyguards helping me into my car while they kidnapped you.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “You’re the office manager at a trucking company. What does any of this have to do with you?”

“Well, I will tell you, but you won’t like it. Last Wednesday morning, I saw you looking in the guard shack, so I went out to see what you wanted. You seemed nice and we really did have a job opening posted. I was hoping you were there for that. Actually, Laura, I like you. I also like Sophie and Gina. I wanted us all to be friends.”

“I thought we were,” I said. “Why can’t we be friends?”

Danielle reached into her pocket and pulled out a clear plastic bag. She held it up for me to see. It contained a smashed and blackened metal tube about four inches long and an inch or so in diameter.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s something I came across a couple of days ago. It looked out of place, so I kept it. It took me a while to figure out what it was, but it turns out to be a tube of lipstick. In fact, you can still sort of see the red color on the inside and make out part of the label. I could read it was called *Pass*

something. I didn't know what the something was until you told me yesterday. It's *Passion's Paradise*."

This can't be good.

"You'll never guess where I found it. It was inside of a semi-trailer that caught on fire out in the middle of the desert. Well, to be more accurate, it was set on fire, and then it exploded."

Oh, shit.

I quickly searched my mind. I remembered I dumped my purse when I'd fallen over the dead guy. I must not have gotten the lipstick when I'd scooped up everything else.

"You see," Danielle said, "we were using that trailer to store some rather valuable merchandise and also to move someone who needed to be moved. It seems you somehow managed to get yourself locked inside the trailer and then had to shoot your way out. We found the hole you shot in the door and about two hundred empty shell casings. I suppose I can understand why you would want to do that. Being locked inside a trailer with a dead man must have been very frightening, not to mention extremely hot. But why did you have to set the trailer on fire? That seems like a very horrible thing to do."

"It was an accident," I said. "I was trying to shoot off the lock and a tracer round bounced back into some lighter fluid and started the fire."

"Do you know how much money and trouble your accident cost us? It wasn't only the cost of the weapons, which was substantial. We've spent weeks planning a safe route through Arizona and bribing officials so we could get everything safely across the border. We had people lined up who paid a lot of money for those weapons."

"You weren't planning on using them to start a war in Scottsdale?"

Danielle laughed, a warm and lighthearted laugh. "In Scottsdale? No, why would you think that? Those weapons were to be delivered to some very powerful and influential men in a country in Central America. I'll tell you, Escobar went a little crazy when he found out everything had been destroyed. You see, the buyer paid for the weapons in advance. Now we're having to scramble to buy whatever we can on the street to put together a new shipment. Do you realize how expensive that will be?"

She moved closer, then reached out and lightly brushed her fingertips across my face. "Once we found out who you actually were, Carlos wanted to kill you right away. He told me how you have caused so much trouble for us the past few months. I told him we should wait and see what we could learn from you. Laura, I like you, really I do. But your interference has made this very awkward. You see what I have to do now, don't you?"

"You don't have to do anything. If you help me escape, you'll never see me again."

"I really wish it were that simple. I've never believed in violence or in an-eye-for-an-eye, but unfortunately, violence is sometimes part of the job. It's a part I hate, but it still must happen."

"Danielle, I don't understand. Why are you doing this? Why would you have bodyguards? How can you be part of a vicious drug cartel?"

"I told you," she said. "It's my job. You see, after we had a shipment of heroin confiscated by the authorities a few months ago, my father sent me up here to make sure things were going smoothly. He trusted Carlos, but my father thought some personal oversight would be a good idea."

What?

"Your father?"

"Yes, my father, Escobar Salazar. He's the head of *Muerte Negro*. Not just in Arizona but everywhere. You've heard of him, yes?"

"You're his daughter? No, that's impossible. We checked."

"Well, I'm not sure what you checked, but I do know who my father is. He's always insisted I keep a, how do you call it, a low profile. When I came into this country, he had me simply walk across the border so there wouldn't be a paper trail. He and my mother were married in secret a long time ago, but for safety reasons we no longer live together. We have different last names and we're never anywhere we can be photographed together. We never directly email or talk on the phone. In public, I always address him as Escobar."

"What about the men at Southwest Desert? If they report to you, don't they also know about your relationship with your father?"

Danielle's laugh was pleasant, still as though we were out having drinks. "Do you know how difficult it would be for me to lead a group of highly competitive men? When I came up to Arizona, the story was that I was Escobar's secretary. I would relay messages to him and he would pass orders back down to the men through me. I guess the men don't realize that communicating with Escobar is almost impossible. It's not as though I can pick up the phone and ring his personal mobile. The cover story works well. These are big, strong, and very aggressive men. Any of them could take me physically and I don't think they'd willingly choose me as their leader. In fact, the only person in Arizona who knows the truth is Carlos. He's known me since I was a little girl."

"There must be something we can do to work this out. Besides, what if I tell Raul and everyone what I know about you?"

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do to save you. If I could figure out a way to help you, I would. Of course, I hope you don't tell anyone what I've told you. It's a big secret and I would need to kill Sophie and Gina for revenge. I don't want to do that. I'm sorry it worked out this way, really I am. I'll leave the chain in this lowered position so it is less painful, but that's really all I can do for you. Okay, the talking's done. Adios, Laura."

"Danielle, wait," I said. "There's something else I need to know."

Unfortunately, my words had no effect. Danielle walked out and I again heard the bolt slide shut, locking me in.

Shit.

I waited for a few minutes, hoping she would change her mind and come back. Some feeling was coming back into my arms and the cramps in my legs had eased. I tried to untie the rope and to unhook myself from the chain but nothing was working. My purse was still hanging against my side but there was no gun in it or anything else that could be useful, even if I did get the ropes untied. My situation looked hopeless, but I told myself not to give up. I still had my phone in my back pocket and I knew Gina would be working on a plan to rescue me. With a sense of desperation, I pulled at the knots on the rope until my fingers were raw.

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Twenty minutes later, the door was again unlocked. Raul walked in and behind him were two grim-looking men. He had lost the sadistic look of pleasure and seemed to be upset. He walked up to me and seemed to be further disgusted when he saw somebody had lowered the chain.

“Bitch, our fun has been slightly postponed. Carlos wants you. Somebody told Tough Tony you were here and he won’t continue the negotiations unless you are out there with him.” He then spat on the ground to show what he thought about that.

Raul pushed the button on the wall and lowered the chain. One of the other men came over and cut the ropes around my ankles. The other spent several moments unlocking the hook that held the chain to the rope around my wrists. Raul then led the way while the men firmly held my shoulders. They force-marched me out to the machine room, and then back down the hallway.

Instead of the conference room, I was led to a warehouse-sized room that seemed to be part of the main manufacturing area. A wide opening in the middle had been cleared out and a large wooden conference table sat in the center of the space. Raul made us stand in the back while we waited to be called on.

Carlos sat at the head of the table. He was flanked by two large and evil-looking men. The one on his left was Sergio, the man with the scar on his face. Three steps behind him were another half-dozen men, most of whom I recognized. Danielle sat behind and to the right of Carlos. She was holding a spiral-bound pad of paper and was busily taking notes.

At the other end of the table was Tough Tony DiCenzo. On his right-hand side was Max. The head of security, Sal Monza, was on his left. Behind Tony were five other large men. They looked familiar, but I didn’t know any of their names.

Gabriella stood off to the side nearest Max, slightly behind the main group. She wore on a black leather jumpsuit with blood-red trim. It was more modest and somewhat looser than her usual style. Her long hair was pulled back into a ponytail and her feet were spread wide apart. She was breathing hard and her cheeks already had a rosy glow of lusty anticipation. Her black bag hung over her shoulder and I noticed it was unzipped. For some reason, out of this entire ghastly scene, the sight of that unzipped

black bag told me everything I needed to know about how the meeting was likely to turn out.

Johnny Scarpazzi stood off to the side of the conference table. As Carlos had instructed, he was in manacles and three men were surrounding him. At a nod from Carlos, the three men led Johnny away. As he left, Johnny looked over at Tony and gave him a thumbs-up sign with one of his cuffed hands. I looked at Tony to see what that meant but he was impassive.

At a wave from Carlos, I was then led up to the conference table. Carlos pointed to a spot on the floor close to where he was sitting and the goons walked me there.

“You see,” Carlos said to Tony. “As I told you, we have her and she is also unharmed. She’s been spying on us all week, so we took her. You know all too well what happens to spies in our business, but as a token of my good faith, I will enter her into the negotiations as well.”

It was then that I got a good look at Tony and Max. Tony had the cop-face on. He had simply been handed one more piece of information. He catalogued it and would now factor it into his thinking. Max didn’t have the cop-face. I could see he was trying to mask it, but his look was pure misery. He stared at me as if I had broken his heart.

“Alright,” Carlos said. “We now know each other’s positions on the heroin trade. We are close in this area, but still have a few minor details to work out, yes? It seems we are currently at an impasse on the arms trafficking, so we will need to table that for the moment.”

“Before we go any further,” Tony said. “I need to have my people back. In fact, we also have a third man who’s recently gone missing. We will need him back, too.”

“Well,” Carlos said, “I don’t know anything about your other man. I only know about the ones we’ve shown you today. As I see it, we have two issues on the table and we have two of your people. I am hopeful we’ll come to terms today on one of the issues, so you can have one of your people back. I’ll let you have Johnny. When we come to an agreement on dividing the arms trafficking, you can have her back as well.”

“No,” Tony said. “It don’t work that way. I’ll need them both back before our talks go any further.”

“Tony, you’re in no position to dictate terms to me. We are having this meeting to resolve differences, not to create new ones.”

“Oh,” Tony said. “I know exactly why we’re here. If you want to work things out, maybe we can do that, but it’s not going to happen while you have my people. You need to release them now or else the whole thing gets shut down and we take this to the streets.”

Carlos’ face contorted and I knew he was about to fly into another one of his rages.

“Do you think you can intimidate me?” Carlos stood and the men on either side of him stood as well. Carlos leaned down and put both hands on the table to stare down at Tony. “I know every move you make. I know every thought you think. I know what you will do and what you won’t. You’re still alive because I have allowed it. If I wanted you dead, you would be dead in an instant. I suggest you do as I say.” Carlos nodded towards Gabriella. “Not even your sadistic little freak over there would be able to help you out.” Carlos shook his head with disgust. “Look at her, she’s turned on like a bride on her wedding night thinking that she might get to shoot someone today.”

Tony stood up and also leaned over with his hands on the table. Max and Sal stood and the people behind Tony stiffened. Gabriella’s face flushed a bright-red and her hand slowly drifted to her bag.

“Oh, I know all about the traitor,” Tony said. “You’ve been sniffing around my organization for months, looking for people to defect. I knew you’d already recruited one man and were looking for another. I had Johnny pretend to be pissed off at me and turn traitor. I had him feed you trivial information for money. I knew you’d eventually let slip to Johnny who your inside source was. So yes, I know all about the traitor, the real traitor. Fortunately, that’s one thing I’m going to fix right away.”

As Tony was talking, I saw Sal’s hand slowly reach into his sports coat and pull out a pistol. I then watched him level the gun at Tony’s chest. Gabriella had positioned herself to watch Carlos and his group. She was at a bad angle to see Sal or the gun. Max also had his attention on Carlos and wasn’t aware of what was happening.

“Tony,” I yelled. “Watch out! Sal has a gun.”

Out of instinct, Tony's arm flew up, knocking Sal's gun out of the way. With his other hand, Tony pulled a pistol from under his shirt and shot Sal twice in the chest. Sal looked down at the holes with a look of disbelief. He tried to mouth something, but he collapsed to the floor before anything could come out.

Carlos flew into a rage. "You bastard!" He pulled a pistol from a shoulder holster and leveled it at Tony. At the same moment, there was a blur of motion as Gabriella pulled the Uzi from her bag. There was the loud *BURRRRRRP* of an entire clip being emptied. Carlos shook as he took the slugs to his chest and mid-section. Four of Carlos' men pulled their pistols, and even as the last bullet left the Uzi, all four fired at Gabriella. She was knocked backward from the force of the slugs and landed on her back. Carlos was upright for a moment then he collapsed to the floor.

The next thirty seconds were pandemonium as everyone scrambled for cover and shots rang out on both sides.

My hands were still tied together and I looked for a place to take cover. I saw Danielle dive behind a large piece of machinery and I thought it looked like a safe enough place. I turned to run when I felt a hard thump to my side, as if someone had hit me with a hammer. Without thinking, I dropped straight to the floor. The pain was intense and I looked down, expecting to see blood. I was relieved when there wasn't any.

I looked around and less than three feet from me was Carlos the Butcher. He was lying on his side and his face was a ghastly white. He lifted his head and for a brief moment, his eyes focused. I could see he understood he was dying and I would be the last person he would ever see. Even as his life faded, his face contorted into one last angry outburst.

"Fuck you, Laura Black."

His head slumped to the floor and his life was over. Although he died right in front of me in a horrible and brutal manner, knowing Carlos was dead filled me with a sense of relief. It was then I noticed the shooting had stopped. I heard Max yelling at his men to cease fire. I heard the same thing from one of the men in the Black Death. I think it was Sergio. He seemed to be the leader now that Carlos was gone.

Max had taken cover behind a large piece of machinery. He called out to the man. "This fighting is useless. People have been hurt on both sides.

Let's end this now and get our people to the hospital."

"Yes, I agree," Sergio said. "But if we come out, how do we know you won't shoot us down like dogs?"

Max came out from behind the machine with his arms outstretched and his pistol pointed to the ceiling. "I promise you, my men won't shoot first." He slowly put his pistol back in his shoulder holster.

"Very well," the man said. "We will not shoot first either."

There was movement as everyone came out of cover. Slowly at first, then more rapidly as each side moved to help the wounded.

I stood up and turned to go to Tony. When I did, my breathing stopped and my knees buckled. Tony was sitting on the floor, his back against a metal cabinet. In the center of his mid-section was a large bleeding wound.

*Oh my God!*

Gabriella was on her back and her legs were moving back and forth in a way that showed she was injured but alive. Max stood between Tony and Gabriella giving orders into a headset in his ear. Two men were kneeling next to Gabriella and three men were with Tony. Sal was alone on the floor and was very dead.

I ran to over to Tony. His face was pale, but he was conscious. He coughed and was obviously in a great deal of pain. "Tony," I said. "You're going to be okay. Talk to me."

His eyes were at first unfocused, but then they looked up at me. "Well, Laura Black, I know I still owe you a favor or two, but I don't think you'll be able to collect. I'm glad we were able to take care of that little prick over there. He can't bother you again, but watch out for Salazar and his men. They'll come after you."

Tony coughed again. This time there was blood on his lips and his face became even paler. The pain seemed to fade and for a moment, his face almost looked peaceful. His head then slowly dropped to his chest. My heart broke and I stepped back as Max and the other men surrounded him. Max shouted orders to alert the clinic and to get Tony and Gabriella transported as quickly as possible.

On the other side of the room, men surrounded Carlos and similar arrangements were being made to get him to a hospital.

I knew Carlos was already dead and I didn't think Tony would live long. My mind raced to Johnny. In the confusion, no one had thought to look for him. I ran out of the manufacturing area and down the hallway where I had seen the men take him. I started opening doors, hoping to find where they had him. As I ran, I also looked for something to cut the ropes that were still holding my wrists together.

When I opened the third door, two of the men who had been guarding Johnny were sprawled out on the floor. The manacles and cuffs were on the floor as well. The third man guarding Johnny was nowhere to be seen. There also was no sign of Johnny.

*Shit.*

It wasn't hard to understand why Johnny had run. From talking with Max, I understood no one but Tony knew the real traitor was Sal. Max didn't know about Johnny only pretending to be a rat so he could get close to Carlos. As far as Johnny knew, Tony hadn't told anyone about his secret mission. Once he learned Tony had died, Johnny wouldn't know if it would be safe to return or not.

I needed to find Johnny before he could do anything rash. I turned to go and my head was slammed violently against the wall. Bright lights flashed and my head spun. My vision blurred and pain radiated from where my head hit the wall. I staggered and looked around to see who had hit me. I felt somebody grab a handful of my hair and pull me up. Through the haze, I saw Raul. The sadistic grin was back on his face.

"Oh, you thought you'd run away from Raul, huh? I don't think so. Carlos may be dead, but I'm still going to cut you."

Holding me by my hair, he half carried me through the machine shop and back to the small room. My head was still spinning and I couldn't do more than weakly strike out at him. The chain was still in the lowered position and he forced my hands onto the hook and locked it into place. He then calmly walked to the wall and hit the button. The motor started up and I was again lifted off the ground. This time, Raul didn't stop until only the tips of my toes were still on the ground. The pain in my wrists and shoulders was intense.

Raul walked to the door and casually shut it. He stepped in front of me and watched me dangle at the end of the chain. My helplessness seemed to both fascinate and excite him.

“You and I are about to have some special time together. I can’t tell you how much I’m going to enjoy myself. Here, I think you’ll really like this part. Right now, this very moment is the start of it. This is where I show you the instrument of your torture.” He reached into his boot and pulled out a folding straight razor. He flipped it open and I heard the blade lock into place. He held it out for me to see, slowly turning it in his fingers.

“Do you like my razor?” he asked. “As soon as I found out we’d be together today I had it sharpened. I’ve used it before to cut through quarter-inch leather. Slicing through your face will be effortless. They say being cut by a sharp knife hurts less than by a dull one, but I’ve never believed it. You’ll have to let me know.”

He grabbed me by my hair again and forced me to look into his face. I tried to kick out at him, but my legs weren’t working very well and my kicks were weak.

He looked around the room and chuckled. “We’re all alone in here, so scream all you want. You should be grateful to me. I’ve decided not to kill you, at least not today. Killing you would be too quick, too easy. But when I’m done with you, it’ll look like your face went through a meat grinder. The only part of your face I won’t cut are your eyes. I want you to be able to see what a nightmare you’ve become. Every time they do another surgery to try to fix your hideous face, I want you to be able to look at yourself when they take off the bandages. Every time you see yourself in the mirror, I want you to remember it was Raul who fucked you up good.”

Raul stood in front of me, his face less than a foot from mine. He reached out and grabbed my lower lip. He pulled it out until my eyes watered with pain. He again lifted the razor for me to see. He held it three or four inches from my eyes, slowly twisting it back and forth so I could see the lights shining on the blade. I tried to kick out at him again but my legs had gone numb.

“It’s going to be hard for you to kiss anyone without lips,” he said. “But who knows, maybe they’ll be able to do a skin graft from your ass that will

sort of look like lips. Oh yeah, I'll tell you what. I'll cut them off slow so you can really feel it."

Still chuckling, he brought the razor down until I felt the cold sharp steel against my skin. He paused a moment, then searing pain shot through me as the razor cut into my lip.

Through the haze of pain, I saw Danielle walk in the room. Raul also saw her. He let go of my lip and stood back. I could see him smile as he pointed the bloody razor at me.

"Come to help with the fun? Let me finish with her lips then I'll hold her while you slash her face. We can each take an ear for a souvenir."

"No," she said. "I got word from Escobar. Now that Carlos is dead, he wants her for negotiations and he wants her undamaged. Untie her and let her go."

It took a second for the words to sink in. Then Raul's face turned red and he began to shout.

"What? Are you mad? After what she did to me? After what happened to Carlos?"

They both started yelling at each other in Spanish. The only words I caught were *Escobar*, *police*, and *arrested*. After about thirty seconds, Raul threw his razor on the ground where it bounced against my feet. He then moved close to me, his ugly face inches from mine. I felt his hot foul breath as he spat out at me. "I'm not through with you, bitch. You're mine. Next time no one's going to come and rescue you, not even Escobar. It will just be you and Raul."

Raul stomped out of the room, only pausing to push over a stack of boxes with a violent shove.

Danielle bent down and picked up the razor, my blood still clinging to it. She looked at the blood and slowly twisted the blade one way, then another. It was as if the blood on the razor was bringing back some sort of memory for her. She walked over to the switch on the wall and lowered the chain until my feet were on the ground. As before, she stopped it. I was still hanging at the end of the chain, but the pain in my shoulders and wrists was easing. I also felt the tingling of feeling coming back into my legs. She came back over and stood facing me.

“Laura, we really need to talk.” Her voice was still the calm conversational voice of friends at lunch. If I weren’t in so much pain, I would have laughed at the situation. What must her world be like if this was just another day at the office for her?

“You’ve done a lot of damage to my organization and you’re under a sentence of death directly from Escobar. Plus, I threatened to kill your friends and I understand you’re upset about that as well. But as you saw, things have changed. Carlos is dead and Tony is dying. I’ll be forced to take a more active role in day-to-day activities. I’ll pick one of the men to take over for Carlos. In fact, you saw one of them has already come forward and has started to speak for the group. He’ll do for the moment. He’ll be the new figurehead of the group, but as of now, I control all operations in Arizona. I hope you know it’s not in my best interests or in Max’s to keep this war going. I’m going to propose a truce and a re-ordering of Arizona. Tony never wanted to deal in heroin because he thought it wasn’t an honorable business. However, that will be my primary focus. Negotiations were actually going well out there until the shooting started. If I can talk Max into splitting the arms trafficking business, I think we can both have a peaceful place in Arizona. If not, then it will be a big war and a lot of people will be hurt. If that happens, the police are not going to be happy with either of us. It will turn into a nightmare and no one wants that.”

“So, what do you want with me?”

“I know you have a relationship with Max. This wasn’t a concern before now, but if I’m to negotiate with Max, I need somebody I can trust as a go-between. The only one I can think of is you. Now, you know who I am and that puts me in great danger. If people find out who my father is, I’ll be a target from your government and from Max’s group, maybe even from some of the people in my own organization. I would need to trust you not to talk about my relationship with Escobar. So, what do you say? If I let you live, can I trust you to keep my identity hidden, no matter who asks? I would need your word on that.”

*Shit, what do I do?*

“Alright, I’ll give you my word. I don’t want Max pulled into a war any more than you do.”

“You care about him, don’t you?”

“Yes, and until today I thought we could actually have a life together. Now, I’m not so sure. If he’s going to be in charge of Tony’s organization, I doubt he’ll have time for me in his life. Besides, I sort of have this rule about not dating a criminal.”

“Alright,” Danielle said, “from this point on, I’m the office manager of the Scottsdale branch of Southwest Desert Transport. My secret identity will be Escobar’s personal secretary and go-between. Max will believe he is dealing with Escobar through me, but only as Escobar’s secretary. I’ll be in contact with you directly so we can actually get this resolved. Would that be okay with you?”

“Well, if not, you’ll have both me and my friends killed.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Unfortunately, we’ve both lost today. I’ve known Carlos my entire life and I know you were close to Tony. One thing remains the same, my father sent me here to make things go smoother, not to oversee a massacre. I like you and I don’t want your blood on my hands, as well. Will you do this for me?”

*What choice do I have?*

“Yes, I’ll do it.”

Danielle lifted the razor and walked around behind me. I felt a moment of panic, but then I felt the razor cut through the rope around my wrists. My arms fell to my sides and I felt a rush of blood flood back into my hands.

Out in the machine shop, or maybe in a hallway beyond, there was a crash that sounded like something falling over. Gina’s urgent voice called out, “Laura, where are you?”

“She’s in here,” Danielle shouted.

“Oh my God,” Gina said as she ran in and saw me. She was in full combat gear with a black bulletproof vest and a web belt holding her gun, cuffs, stun gun, and pepper spray. When she saw Danielle standing behind me with a bloody razor in her hands, anger filled Gina’s eyes. Her pistol was out and leveled at Danielle’s chest.

*Shit, what do I do about Danielle? It’s say something now or never.*

“No, Gina, it’s okay,” I said. “Danielle saved me from being maimed.”

I could see Gina rapidly assessing the situation. She had her stony cop-face on. The same one Reno gets when something bad is happening.

“We need to get you out of here,” Gina said. “Both of you. I also need to find Johnny.”

“Johnny’s gone,” I said. “I found where they were holding him, but he’d already escaped.”

“Well, that makes things a little simpler.” Gina paused and listened to somebody talking in her headset. “Everyone else has already left. Sophie says a police car pulled up in front of the building. We can’t get out that way.”

“How are we going to get out?” Danielle asked.

“There’s a separate back entrance and access road for this group of buildings,” Gina said. “Sophie’s already on her way there. I doubt the police know about that yet. If we go out the back, we won’t be visible from the front.”

Gina looked at me. “Where’s Amber?”

“Shit,” I said. “I forgot about Amber. She’s locked in a room up front.”

“Let’s get her and then we need to go. I don’t want to explain to the police why we’re at a crime scene. What does Amber know about what happened here?”

“Not a thing. They shoved her in a room before anything happened.” I started thinking about the shootout. I looked up at Gina. “Tony and Carlos are both dead.”

“Tony’s not dead yet,” Gina said. “I talked to Max as he was leaving. Tony’s on his way to a hospital. Max sent me back here to look for you and Johnny. He was going to come himself, but he needed to take care of Tony and I said I’d handle it. I’m sorry about what happened to Tony, but I don’t want to hear any more details. I realize he’s your friend, but I have a pretty good idea of what happened here today. If I learn any more it crosses a line for me. Hurry up, let’s go.”

“Sophie,” Gina yelled into her headset as we ran through the building. “What’s going on outside? Another police cruiser pulled up? Okay, let me

know if they come into the building or if one of them goes around to the back.”

# Chapter Fourteen

When we reached the storeroom, Gina slid the bolt open with a loud metallic snap. The room beyond was dark, but from the inside we heard Amber crying and whimpering. I flipped on the switch next to the door and the room flooded with light.

“Amber, it’s Gina. Come out. Hurry.”

A few seconds later, Amber stumbled out, blinking in the bright light. She looked terrible. Her makeup was smeared from crying and her hair was a tangled mess. Even as we hustled her down the hall, we couldn’t stop her from babbling.

“That awful man shoved me in that dirty room and then he turned off the lights. I didn’t know what was going to happen to me. No one came to get me. I was so scared. I didn’t have a phone. I didn’t have any food or water. I could have died in there.”

“You were only in there for two hours,” I said.

“I had to pee on the floor!”

Gina rolled her eyes and led us through the building. According to Sophie, a third police cruiser had pulled up, but they were still outside talking. Most likely waiting for a supervisor to arrive and coordinate entry into the building.

We made it out the back door and calmly walked over to Gina’s Land Rover. Sophie took shotgun while Amber, Danielle, and I took the back seat. I had one window and Danielle had the other. My mind was still racing over my new relationship with Danielle. I made sure Amber sat between us.

My feelings toward Danielle were hard to describe. The woman had ordered my death and threatened my friends. I felt a deep sense of betrayal. I had considered her a friend and I was shocked she could be so heartless. But then she came back and saved me from being disfigured and possibly killed. She did this, even knowing how much it would anger the men who now worked directly for her. Raul wasn’t going to be satisfied. I had escaped his vengeance and I knew he would come after me again. If

Danielle was going to negotiate with Max, I knew I would need to be there to calm both sides and make sure things didn't get out of hand.

I felt a deep sense of relief when we pulled into traffic. I gave Gina directions to where Amber's car was parked and she headed that way.

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After about ten minutes, we approached the parking lot. I was lost in thoughts of Tony when Amber burst into tears. Big wet tears with a loud wail of unhappiness. Danielle looked at her with concern, but Sophie only looked back and rolled her eyes.

"I hate this job," Amber whined between sobs. "I've never been so scared in my life. I quit. I don't care what my dad told me. I quit and I never want to do anything at your stupid law firm ever again." She started back with her loud crying. "I had to pee on the floor."

Gina quickly pulled the Land Rover to a stop. I undid my seatbelt, reached into my back pocket, and pulled out my battered copy of the resignation letter. When I looked up, Sophie and Gina were both holding out their copies toward her as well.

Amber took Sophie's copy. Probably because it was the least crinkled. She read it while Gina produced a pen and Sophie pulled out the notary stamp from her bag. Amber then took the pen and slowly signed her name. Sophie took back the paperwork, notarized the signature, and then gave it to Gina who witnessed the document. Sophie pulled out a small notary book and had Amber sign that as well.

"Now let me out," Amber said. "I never want to see any of you ever again."

I opened my door and got out. Amber climbed out and stomped toward her car. I climbed back in and closed the door.

As I watched her go, Sophie carefully put the document into her bag and Gina drove through the lot and then back into traffic. The three of us waved to Amber as we drove by.

"I don't know what just happened," Danielle said. "But I'm glad she's gone. That girl smelled like a wet dog."

Sophie let out a snort, then a giggle, and then she started laughing. Despite my outrage and broken heart, I started laughing, too. I couldn't help it, it was the first time today that something good had happened. Sophie was laughing so hard she was crying and she was waving her hand in front of her face. Even Gina and Danielle were laughing.

Watching Danielle laughing with my two best friends gave me a feeling of unreality. Should I look at her as the vicious head of the Black Death or should I look at her as the best chance for avoiding a war with Max? In either case, she was now a part of our group and I had promised to keep her identity a secret. I would feel bound to keep that promise, even if it wouldn't result in her killing the people I loved.

Shit, how do I get myself in these situations?

~~~~~

We dropped Danielle off at Southwest Desert, then drove back to Old Town. Gina parked in her space behind the office and we went inside.

Now that the excitement had ended and my adrenaline subsided, I felt terrible. My lip throbbed where it had been cut, but I knew it could have been a lot worse. As it was, it was only a small nick that probably wouldn't even need stitches. What was concerning me more was the pain in the ribs on my right side. I remembered being shot and feeling the pain, but there hadn't been any blood. Then I'd been distracted by Tony's injuries and had forgotten about it until now.

I went into the bathroom and lifted up my shirt. On my right side was a bright purple bruise about three inches in diameter. As I felt it, the two ribs underneath the bruise were throbbing. I didn't think I'd broken anything, but I had taken one heck of a pounding from something.

*What could have caused that?*

I had a sudden inspiration and went back to my cubicle. The bruise occurred exactly where my bag was covering my side, hanging on by its strap. I picked up the bag and looked at it. There was a hole about a half an inch wide in the front. I looked the bag over, but didn't see any exit holes. When I dug through the bag, I saw the fire agate had shattered. As I pulled out the pieces, I noticed bits of lead and copper were embedded in the rock.

*I'll be damned. The stone literally stopped a bullet for me.*

My phone rang with the theme to *The Love Boat*. I answered and as soon as I began talking with Max, I could tell he was exhausted and mentally drained.

“Laura,” he said, “I wanted to check on you. I know I should have called before now, but it’s been very busy here.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “What’s going on with Tony and Gabriella?”

“Tony’s in surgery. I won’t know more until he’s out. Gabriella’s still in X-ray. I’m glad you’re alright. I saw you go down, but then you seemed to be fine. Were you and Gina able to get Johnny?”

“No, he had already escaped. Have you heard from him yet?”

“No, and with everything going on over here, I haven’t had a lot of time to focus on that.”

“I understand. Let me know if there is anything I can do.”

“I will. I’ll call you as soon as I find out about Tony. If everything goes well, stop by the hospital tomorrow. I’m afraid we’ll need to postpone our date.”

“I know, don’t worry about it. We can plan another one.”

We disconnected and I called Suzie. She answered right away.

“Hi, Suzie, it’s me. I was able to see Johnny today. He looked to be all right and seemed to be in good spirits. I wasn’t able to talk with him, but there’s a chance he’ll make contact tonight. If not, I have an idea where to find him and I might need your help tomorrow.”

“Of course, I’ll be home all day. You’re sure he’s all right?”

“He seemed to be. I’ll call you as soon as I hear anything.”

“Thank you, I’ll be here.”

I disconnected and went up to the front offices. Sophie was sitting behind her desk. Gina and Lenny were standing next to it. Lenny was holding Amber’s resignation letter.

“Nice job on this,” Lenny said as I walked closer. “Getting rid of Amber without compensation is a good win for us. Now, what about Johnny? I heard you were able to get a look at our missing man?”

“That’s right. He seemed to be healthy.”

“Did it cross your mind that you were supposed to retrieve him and not just look at him? What do I tell the police when they ask about our independent progress in locating him? Should I say we’ve decided to run a surveillance program on him rather than trying to bring him in? What do I tell Tough Tony when he calls?”

*I really don’t need this right now.*

“I wasn’t in a position to get him. I’ll know more tonight or tomorrow. Tony won’t be calling. He already knows.”

Lenny shook his head. “Are you sure you’re up for this? Do you need Gina to help?”

“I’m fine. Give me until tomorrow.”

~~~~~

During the drive from Southwest Desert to the office, I had told Gina and Sophie the basics of what happened. After Gina and Lenny left for the night, I told Sophie everything. Partially so she could understand what happened, but mostly to help me get it straight in my own mind. The only parts I left out were some of the details about how my lip was cut. I also left out Danielle’s relationship with Escobar Salazar and her real role in the Black Death.

“What are you going to do with Max?” Sophie asked. “If he’s going to be the new boss, dating him might be a challenge.”

“I don’t know if I can date him or even see him as friends. It was different when he was going to go legitimate, but now he’s deeper into crime than ever.”

“Do you still have your break-up date with Reno set for Thursday? It seems like you have until then to decide what you want to do.”

~~~~~

I got up early the next morning and quickly got ready. Max had briefly called at about eleven the night before to let me know Tony was out of surgery. Max said he’d talked with the doctors and Tony’s life was not in danger, but a piece of the bullet had caused some nerve damage. It was only after he hung up that I realized he didn’t say anything about Gabriella.

~~~~~

I drove to the clinic on Frank Lloyd Wright Boulevard. I'd been there before, but hadn't realized it was less than a mile away from where the Black Death had its headquarters. I parked and quickly walked into the clinic. A branching hallway off one of the upper floors seemed to be set aside for Tony. I've never been able to understand how he can have seven or eight rooms to himself, but he seems able to do it whenever there's trouble.

Two beefy and armed security guards stood on either side of the doors leading to the empty section of the clinic. As I walked down the hallway, another guard was standing in front of Tony's room. Apparently, everyone knew who I was because they opened the doors and let me in without a word.

I walked in, afraid of what I might find. From what Max had said, I knew Tony's injuries were severe.

Tony was asleep on the bed. He was attached to monitoring machines and IV lines, but his color was better than I had anticipated. Max was sitting in a chair next to the bed and he stood as I came in. He looked terrible and I could tell he had probably been at the hospital the entire night.

Milo was in another chair. He stood up and said hello. He then walked out, telling Max he was going out to check the perimeter, leaving the two of us alone with Tony.

I expected to see Gabriella in the bed next to Tony, but the bed was empty. My stomach clenched and I felt my chest tighten.

"Gabriella?" I asked.

"Yesterday afternoon," Max said. "Gabriella was simultaneously hit with four slugs to the chest. However, based on my previous experiences with this sort of meeting, I convinced her to wear a bulletproof vest under her outfit. She didn't like the way she looked, but she did it to humor me. She has some bruising and two cracked ribs, but the doctors say she'll be fine. In fact, they sent her home earlier this morning. Knowing her, she'll be back on bodyguard duty soon, probably by the end of the day."

Relief flooded through me. "I'm glad she's alright. I saw her go down and knew she'd been hurt. What about Tony? I saw his injury and it looked bad. In fact, I assumed he had died."

“Well, no, not dead, but the shot he took from Carlos did a lot of damage. As I told you last night, the bullet missed his heart, but Tony has some damage to his internal organs. A fragment also caused some nerve damage. The doctors say it isn’t life threatening, but will require several months of recovery and therapy. Even with that, he may not be able to walk again. They won’t know for sure until they run some tests. Tony’s been awake a couple of times today and each time he sounds better. The last time was about an hour ago and we had a fairly normal conversation.”

I went down to the cafeteria and brought back coffee and blueberry muffins. When I returned to the room, Tony was awake. When he looked at me, I could see he was alert. This filled me with relief. Seeing him with good color and a sharp mind let me know everything was going to be all right.

I walked over and held his hand. “Hey, how are you doing?”

“The doctors tell me I’ll live. As I was telling Max, I may have acted somewhat rashly yesterday, something I tell my guys never to do. I boasted to Carlos that I knew about the real traitor and it looks like I’ve paid the price.”

Tony spoke slowly and the act of speaking was obviously painful, but he spoke clearly.

“I’m feeling rather weak and I’m sure I’ll be asleep most of the day. Before that happens, there are some things you should know. There is also something I would ask of you.”

A small shudder went through me at the thought of Tony asking favors of me. Injured or not, doing favors for Tony DiCenzo was not something I would normally volunteer to do.

“Okay,” I said, “tell me. I’m still trying to figure some of this out.”

“Even before the bomb at Danica’s wedding, I knew I had a spy in my group. Too many things were going wrong. Johnny and I spent many long hours trying to figure out who it was. I suspected Sal, but Johnny was unsure. He and I hatched a private plan to flush out the traitor. Johnny volunteered to pretend to be dissatisfied with me and switch over to the other side. The goal of this was to get close enough to Carlos to find out the identity of the true informant. He made contact with the Black Death and

started feeding them legitimate but unimportant information. They eventually believed his sincerity and Johnny soon became their second paid informant.”

“We found the payments Johnny was getting from Salazar,” I said. “When I saw them, I assumed he was an informant.”

“Yes, I inferred that much. That’s why I told you to disregard what you found. I would have liked to have been more open with you, but security on our side was airtight. The only one who knew something was going on was Max. I only told him Johnny and I were running a side operation and I asked him to be patient while it played out. We’ve been twisting ourselves in knots creating and running minor operations we knew Carlos would interfere with.”

“What about the kidnapping? Did you know they would do that?”

“The timing was somewhat of a surprise. However, I assumed that at some point Johnny would be abducted to give his treachery credibility. In fact, I’d purposefully stalled negotiations with Carlos to force him to act. Once Johnny was taken, I had to go through the expected motions to locate and try to recover him. As I said, his main goal was to discover the name of the true informant. I told Johnny if it was indeed Sal, he was to give me a thumb’s up. You saw Johnny give me the signal and you know the rest.”

“What about the talks with Carlos about sharing some of the business? Were you sincere? Would you have actually given them what they were asking for?”

“Yes. The accommodations they were requesting were reasonable. The heroin trade is something I’ve never had an interest in and they were only asking that I not interfere as they consolidate their position. However, I know the negotiations would only put off the real fight for a year, two at the most. Like I said, maybe I acted somewhat rashly in telling Carlos I knew who the real traitor was, but my main goals were achieved. Both Carlos and the traitor are gone. My hope is they replace Carlos with someone who is more reasonable. I think they’ll also walk a little more carefully around us next time around.”

“That was incredibly brave of Johnny. He easily could have been killed.”

“That is the kind of man Johnny Scarpazzi is. Unfortunately, he has again disappeared. For all he knows, I am dead. It’s my guess he is unsure if the real story has come out and he believes his life may be in danger from our organization thinking he’s the actual informant. I believe he is merely laying low until the true facts can come out. I have Johnny’s mission and innocence documented in a file that was to be opened and read upon my death, but Johnny knows it may take some time for that to occur.”

“How can I help?”

“As you know, I don’t pry too much into the personal lives of my men, so I don’t know where Johnny would be hiding. You do this sort of thing for a living and I believe he would trust you. As a personal favor for me, would you help find him and bring him back in?”

“No need to use a favor on that,” I said as I gripped his hand tighter. I smiled, remembering how Tony and I had similar conversations in the past. “As a friend, I’ll be glad to help out. Besides, I think I know where he is. I’ll see if his girlfriend will come along and I’ll go get him. If she’s with me, it will make things go smoother.” I reached into my back pocket and took out my phone. “Tony, I have an idea that will help with that. Um, would you do me a favor?”

~~~~~

Five minutes later, as I was getting ready to leave the hospital room, I had an inspiration and walked back to the bed, digging through my purse.

“Tony, before I leave, I have something for you.”

I pulled out the pointed white quartz crystal Beatrix had given me and placed it in Tony’s hand.

“I had someone I trust tell me this was a master healing crystal and it could help a person recover from an injury. I know you don’t believe in any of this and I really didn’t either. But would you humor me and keep this near you for a couple of days? I think it might help.”

I left the room and Max walked with me. I could tell he was exhausted from lack of sleep and worry. I gave him a hug and then stood close to him.

“I’ll go up and see if I can find Johnny,” I said. “If he’s where I think he is, you should have him back by tonight. I know you’ll be busy for the next

few days, but let's get together sometime soon and figure out what we want to do."

Max understood what I meant and nodded his head. We shared another hug. This one longer and more emotional.

I turned and walked down the hallway towards the elevator. When the doors opened, Gabriella stepped out. She wore her traditional black leather jumpsuit and I could see some of the bandages wrapped around her chest. Her black bag was hanging by its strap over her shoulder.

"Are you alright?" I asked. "I saw you get shot by four men."

"Yes," she said. "I will recover. Yesterday Max said to wear bulletproof vest. I haven't worn one in years, but it is good. I crack two ribs, but I am good. I heard you got shot, but I see I am wrong. I am glad."

As she talked, she seemed upset. Not from her injuries, but from something else.

"Gabriella?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

She motioned me to come closer and she lowered her voice.

"I failed Tony and because of me he was shot and almost died. I saw Carlos pull out his gun and I was too slow. If I was faster, Tony would not be in hospital."

"You weren't slow. You were firing as soon as Carlos had his gun out. I didn't realize he had even fired until I saw Tony."

"I was never slow before. I am getting too old. It is good Carlos is dead. He was a very bad man. I'm glad you were there to talk with Tony. I know how much he likes you. I know Max likes you, too. Maybe you will help Max now that he is boss?"

"I'm not sure what will happen with Max and me. If he's going to be the boss, he might not have time for me." I looked at her and remembered how Max had talked about working closely with her in the past. "Will you help take care of Max?"

Gabriella looked up. Her eyes had a dark fire behind them. "Nobody ever hurt Max. I take care of Max with my life."

As she said that, a twinge of jealousy shot through me.

~~~~~

I walked to the lobby of the clinic and called Suzie. She answered right away.

“Suzie, it’s Laura. I have some news about Johnny. It looks like I was correct and he’s disappeared again, but this time I think it was his idea. He’s hiding, but I might know where he is. I’m going up to the mountains to look for him. Would you come up with me? I may need to convince him it’s alright to come back and having you there should help.”

~~~~~

I drove to Suzie’s house in Paradise Valley and parked in the big circular driveway next to her Jaguar. As soon as I came to a stop, the front door opened and Suzie came out. Without any discussion, she hit the remote, unlocked her car, and got in. I got out of my car and climbed in beside her. She started the car and I gave her instructions to get to the cabin in Strawberry.

We didn’t talk a lot on the drive up. Suzie was nervous about Johnny, but she seemed to understand I couldn’t answer a lot of questions about what had happened. My thoughts were going in several directions at once. Bouncing between Max and Reno, then to Danielle and Escobar.

We made it to Strawberry, then took the road that led into the mountains west of town. Another fifteen minutes and we were in front of the closed gate barring the road to the cabin. No other car was visible, but I knew Johnny would be watching us if he were indeed hiding out at his retreat.

We left the car in front of the gate and walked the rest of the way. A dark green Jeep was parked in the dirt driveway near the front porch. When we got to the cabin, the door was standing open and we walked in.

Johnny was standing in the middle of the room and he appeared to be unarmed. Glancing around the room, I saw an assault rifle casually leaning against a bookshelf. Johnny’s eyes flicked between Suzie and me. Suzie also saw his indecision and spoke.

“It’s alright, slave, Laura knows about our relationship and she’s a trusted friend.”

Johnny walked to Suzie and fell to his knees. He looked up at Suzie with love and affection.

“Slave,” Suzie said in her controlling voice, “this one time, I give you permission to stand.”

Johnny stood up and Suzie wrapped her arms around him. He seemed to be a little shocked by this display of affection, but he also seemed pleased. He put his arms around her and they held each other tightly. After a moment, he looked down at her.

“Mistress, I heard you went to the police to have me tracked down, and you even got Laura involved. Why go to all that trouble for such a lowly slave?”

“Because, John, you’re *my* lowly slave. And that makes you very precious to me.”

After several more hugs and a tour of the cabin, both the upstairs and then the downstairs, Johnny asked Suzie if he could speak with me alone. Suzie granted him permission, then went upstairs while we stayed down. When we were alone, Johnny got a troubled look on his face.

“Thank you for bringing my mistress to me, but I can’t go back. Tony and I set up a pretty convincing story that I was the rat. We were trying to draw out Sal Monza, the real snitch. Now that Tony’s dead I have no proof it wasn’t me.”

“Tony’s not dead.”

Johnny’s look was both shocked and hopeful at the same time. “What? Are you sure? I know all about the shooting. One of Carlos’ men came running through the building screaming that Carlos and Tony were both dead and for everyone to leave. One of them foolishly unlocked my cuffs and I was able to take the rest of them out. I’ve been making some calls today, but most of our group heard Tony was dead.”

“Yes, I’m sure he’s alive. I talked to him this morning. He’s badly hurt, but they say he’ll likely recover.”

I could see the emotions wash over Johnny’s face. I decided to change subjects before his emotions got out of hand.

“What happened last Monday?” I asked. “You just disappeared.”

Johnny snorted in disgust. “I was leaving for my weekly session with Mistress. As I stepped out of the house, I was surrounded by five guys.

They said Carlos wanted to talk with me. Tony and I thought this might happen, so I went along with it. I was held in a house in North Scottsdale the entire time. On Saturday, four men came in and said we were going out for drinks and to meet someone. We went to the Winchester Saloon and they made me pay with a credit card from my wallet. As soon as I paid, they said the meeting was off and we were going back. They had several pistols and stun guns on me and said they'd shoot me if I made a move. Two days ago, they brought me to the office building in Scottsdale to meet with Carlos. While I was there, I heard Carlos talking to another man about Sal and some information he had passed on to Carlos. This confirmed Tony's suspicions and at the meeting I gave him the signal."

"What about the bruise on your face?"

"Well, even though they were treating me okay, that didn't mean they liked me. We got into an argument and I took out a couple of them after we came back from the Winchester. After that they kept me in full manacles."

"The Winchester was an excuse to for you to use a credit card to alert everyone you were still in town. Carlos wanted Tony to know you were being held. It was all an attempt to speed up the negotiations."

"I thought that was the reason. Otherwise I would have put up more of a fight."

"Are you ready to come back?"

"I'm not sure. Do you think things are calm enough for me to return?"

I pulled out my phone and opened up a video I had taken earlier in the day. It showed Tony DiCenzo laying on the hospital bed. For some reason he looked much worse in the video than he did in real life. I gave the phone to Johnny and he watched the message.

*"Johnny," Tony said, "I'm sending this message with Laura Black. The truth of your service to me is now widely known. Because of your bravery, our internal problem has been taken care of. I hope you can come back to work soon. As you can see, I'm a little banged up, but Max is going to need both your strength and your wisdom over the next few months."*

Johnny handed the phone back and I thought I heard a sniffle.

"You'll need to go down to the police station and report in," I said. "You don't have any charges pending, but there's an open investigation on you."

They'll want to see you with their own eyes before they can close it. I'll call Lenny and he'll go in with you to make sure the police keep it short and to the point."

Suzie gave me the keys to her Jaguar. She said she wanted to be alone with Johnny for a while, then they would drive down to the police station in his Jeep.

As soon as I got a cell signal, I called Lenny with the news. For once, this put him in a good mood. I let him know Suzie's phone would have a signal soon and he could call her to coordinate the visit to the police.

It was wonderful to drive the Jaguar. I put down the top and happily felt the wind in my hair as I cruised down the Beeline Highway towards Scottsdale. My only goals were to drive to Suzie's, get my car, go home, and then try to forget about what a shitty week I'd just had.

# Chapter Fifteen

By Thursday afternoon, things had started to return to normal. My lip was healing and the pain in my side was starting to fade. I hadn't talked to Max since meeting in the hospital the day before, and I still had a date with Reno set for later in the evening.

Mike Malloy had come to the office earlier in the morning and Lenny presented the results of the investigation. Mike was relieved it was nothing more serious than an angry ex-boyfriend who'd been starting the fires. I knew Lenny was annoyed the assignment led to nothing more than billable hours and not the huge court settlement he had wanted.

~~~~~

By three o'clock Lenny had taken off for the day. Gina and I were standing at Sophie's desk talking about what had happened over the last several days when my phone started playing the theme to *The Love Boat*. Sophie smiled and clapped her hands while Gina gave me a look of stern disapproval.

"Laura," Max said when I answered. "Forgive me for again disturbing you at work, but if you could step outside for a moment, I have something for you."

"Um, okay. I'll be right out."

I disconnected and looked at Sophie and Gina. "Max says he has something for me."

"How'd he know where you were?" Sophie asked.

Gina only shook her head in a way that reminded me of my mother.

I went outside and saw Max parking a silver Mercedes convertible about four spaces down from the front of the office. This one was much older and somehow seemed friendlier than the shiny black convertible he normally drove.

About twenty yards down the street, a black Cadillac also pulled to a stop. Johnny Scarpazzi was at the wheel. He looked good considering what he'd been through the past several days. Behind Johnny was a black

Suburban with Milo driving. Gabriella and two other people were with him. As Milo pulled the big SUV to a stop, Gabriella stepped out and surveyed the area, her black bag hung over her shoulder.

I turned and looked behind me. As I expected, Sophie and Gina were standing in the door of the office, watching everything.

Max stepped out of the car holding the keys and a thick envelope. He walked over to where I was standing on the sidewalk and held out both to me. I took them and looked up at Max for an explanation.

“This was Tony’s car,” he said. “He bought it new about fifteen years ago. It has a lot of miles and a few dings. Tony always kept up with the maintenance, but the cosmetics of his personal vehicles never mattered to him. The last several years, he’s seldom driven himself anywhere, so the car’s basically been in storage. About a month ago, he told me he wanted you to have it. I had the shop go over it. They replaced everything that could be replaced, from the tires to the fan belts. Tony had the engine and drive train rebuilt about a year before he stopped driving it, so it’s basically a new car with an old exterior. It’s the kind of nice but nondescript car you see everywhere in Scottsdale. Tony thought in your line of work it could come in handy.”

“Why would Tony do that for me?” I asked. “I’ve only been with him half a dozen times. He doesn’t even really know me.”

“Back after you first met Tony, I said you had charmed him. I wasn’t kidding about that. You see, in Tony’s world he’s usually surrounded by two kinds of people. People who fawn over him and people scared to death of him. You’ve always treated him as a friend. You tell him what you think even when you don’t agree with him. You’ve risked your life for him more than once. He owes you favors, but you’ve never asked anything of him. Tony doesn’t have many people like that in his life, at least not anymore. He’s mentioned to me several times that you have a future and that I should look after you.”

“Is that why you’re doing this? Because Tony asked you to?”

“No, I’m with you because I want to be. Bringing over the car in person was an excuse to see you again.”

The look of sadness on Max's face was the same look he had given me in the meeting with Carlos. It was a look that broke my heart. "With Tony sidelined, my position in the company has changed, maybe permanently. I'll go from being the obscure guy in the background to the face of the company. With these changes, I won't be able to see you, at least not romantically, maybe not at all. Please don't take this wrong, I still want you and I'd welcome having you in my life, now more than ever. But I don't want you to be known as the gangster's girlfriend. If word gets out we're romantically involved, it may make you a target. I couldn't live with that."

"I was serious when we talked the other night," I said. "It's true I can't date a criminal, but I still want to see if we can have a life together."

"I know you were serious. I want to be with you, but it can't happen, at least not now. The risks are too high and I won't put you in danger. Hopefully things will get straightened out over time, but until then, I need to keep a distance between me and the people I love."

Did he say love?

He took a step closer and put his arms around me. "We've waited this long, a bit longer won't kill us."

No, but it will feel like it.

I didn't want to argue with him in the street and this wasn't the time for a discussion like this in either case. Not worrying about who was watching, I wrapped my arms around him and held him tightly. I felt the energy from his body as we embraced. Even now, all I could think of was my growing physical response to being close to him and a sadness that it may never be realized. I fought back tears as I buried my face in his chest. At last, I pulled away. I looked up at him and his face sparkled through my wet eyes.

"We aren't over yet," I said. "Go do what you have to do, but don't think this ends anything."

He bent down and softly kissed my cheek. "Not on my side either. Later, gorgeous."

I watched as Max climbed into the front seat of the Cadillac next to Johnny. I then watched as both cars drove away.

~~~~~

I walked back into the office holding both the key and the envelope. I felt overwhelmed with emotions.

“You got Tough Tony’s old car?” Sophie said. “Nice. It’s about time somebody gave you something you can actually use. Not that getting a diamond or an old bottle of scotch wasn’t nice, but now you can get rid of that old piece of shit car of yours. Did you look in the trunk? If I was you, I’d look in the trunk. There might still be a dead body in it. You know, one they sorta forgot about.”

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea to accept gifts from Tony DiCenzo,” Gina said. “It might be seen as a payoff for some sort of service. You don’t want to get drawn into that kind of investigation.”

“What’d you and Max talk about?” Sophie asked. “I wanted to get closer so I could hear better, but Gina said it would be rude. Are you two still getting together?”

“Laura,” Gina said, “being involved with Max wouldn’t be a smart thing to do. You do know that, don’t you?”

“I do know that,” I said, “but I don’t think Max will let me anywhere near him, no matter how I feel about it. At least not until things settle down. I don’t even think we can see each other as friends.”

Sophie was disappointed while Gina seemed pleased. As for me, my stomach was bunched into a knot, my chest hurt, and I felt like crying. As always, I wasn’t not sure how I ended up in these positions, but it always seems to work out this way.

~~~~~

Ten minutes later, the door to the street opened and Suzie Lu walked in. She saw the three of us and broke out in a huge smile.

“Hello, everybody,” Suzie said as she walked over to where we were talking.

Seeing her again began to lift my spirits. I love being surrounded by people who can do that.

Suzie was holding a big box with brightly colored ribbons on it. She set it on Sophie’s desk and pulled out a bottle of Dom Pérignon. I looked in the box and saw eleven more bottles lined up in rows.

“I brought over a case for each of you,” she said. “If you’re not busy, I thought maybe we could drink a bottle while they’re still cold.”

“Now you’re talking,” Sophie said as she hurried to the bar in the main conference room and came back with four champagne flutes. Gina popped the cork and soon we each had a glass in our hands.

“Thank you again for everything,” Suzie said, lifting her glass in a toast. “If it hadn’t been for you three, things might have gone badly for John.”

We held our glasses up and clinked them together. The champagne was wonderful and after about ten minutes, we decided maybe we should open a second bottle as well. Sophie put some music on the office intercom system and soon it felt like a party.

As we were finishing the second bottle. Suzie turned to Sophie. “Do you remember the other day when I told Jules to set up an appointment, no matter where he had to fly me?”

“Sure, you said he needed some extra training on how to be an obedient slave.”

“Well, it’s going to be this weekend in New York. I’ve got a penthouse suite at a five-star hotel overlooking Central Park. You know about Jules and his needs. How’d you like to come along and help? You wouldn’t need to do anything except watch and maybe taunt him a little. Remind him how disgusting and pathetic he is. He’s mentioned to me how much he appreciated you laughing at him the other day. I know he’d enjoy being trained again in front of a stranger. Plus, from what I’ve heard, you’re pretty good with a paddle. I’d be glad to have you take over from time to time.”

“Well,” Sophie said. “I don’t know. It was kinda fun watching you knee him in the nuts the other day, but I’m not sure I’d go for watching you do that all weekend.”

“I’ll split my fee with you, fifty-fifty. We’d be talking ten or fifteen thousand.”

“Oh, hell yeah, I’ll do it,” Sophie said. “When do we leave? I’ve got a couple of naughty leather outfits that’ll work nicely. You know, I’ve got a sexy necklace that once belonged to Raquel Welch. I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t mind if I wore it for your obedience training. I’ve even got an

embossed paddle that'll leave heart-shaped red marks on his ass. I could bring it along too, just in case."

"Perfect," Suzie said. "Laura, what about you? The hotel suite has plenty of beds and you know how much Jules enjoys being watched. We could make a girls' weekend out of it."

"Thanks," I said as my mind flashed back to Max. "It sounds like fun, but I don't think I'm up for it this weekend."

"I understand," Suzie said. "There's always next time. We make a pretty good team. I'd have you and Sophie trained up in no time."

Suzie then stopped talking and looked at Gina. She tilted her head to the side and you could see the gears working in her head.

"Gina," Suzie said. "You know what I do for my hobby and you know what Sophie and I'll be doing for the weekend. Every time we meet, I sense your authority over the men who surround you. From what I understand, you've had a lot of training on how to control a man physically. Why don't you come with us? You can have the other half of the fee. I'm mainly doing this because I care about Jules and this will do him a world of good. With a little training, I think you'd make a first-rate dominatrix. What do you say?"

Sophie and I looked at each other. We both sucked in some air and prepared ourselves for the lecture. I only hoped Gina wouldn't get too pissed at Suzie for suggesting she do something like that. Gina wasn't a prude by any means, but she definitely wasn't kinky.

"Sure," Gina said. "I'd be glad to come along and help. Actually, it sounds like fun."

Sophie and I looked back at each other. The look on Sophie's face was confusion and I'm sure mine looked the same.

"I don't have any leather outfits," Gina said. "But I do have a nice selection of police handcuffs. Maybe they'll come in handy." She paused and seemed to think. "You know, I have my old patrol uniform in a box somewhere. Think he'd enjoy being disciplined by a real cop?"

Suzie clapped her hands together and squealed a little in happiness. "I can see this'll be a great weekend."

Sophie and Gina started chatting about going shopping after work to get some accessories for the weekend. Suzie looked at me. “Laura, can I talk with you for a moment?”

We went into the main conference room and Suzie closed the door. She looked slightly embarrassed.

“I talked with John about what happened and he let me know you literally put your life on the line to help rescue him. After everything you’ve done for us, I’d feel guilty charging you rent on your apartment. I’ve spoken with the management company. From now on, please consider your apartment as thank you gift from me, for as long as you’d like to live there.”

“Wow,” I said. I was stunned and didn’t know what to say. On top of everything that had already happened today, this was too much for me. Struggling for words, I held out my arms and gave Suzie a hug.

“Thank you,” I said. “You don’t know how much this will help me.”

Suzie looked back at me and smiled. “John’s still alive and you were a big part of that. He didn’t tell me all the details, but he really didn’t have to. I know it could have turned out differently.”

~~~~~

At seven o’clock, I pulled into the parking lot at Frankie’s, turned off the car, and sat.

*So, what was I going to do with my life?*

I’d told Max I was going to call it off with Reno and be with him. I’d been serious and I’m pretty sure it’s what I still wanted. But now Max was the head of his organization and he wouldn’t be able to see me, at least not for the next several months, maybe forever. I knew he didn’t want the role, but I also knew that he wouldn’t back away from his responsibilities.

*So, what should I do?*

Should I still call it off with Reno and wait around for Max to become available? I’m sure I could get Max to break away from business long enough for a few dates along the way. Of course, Gabriella, and probably two or three others, would be shadowing us the entire time. Max had made himself a target by taking over the organization. Not only of Danielle and Salazar, but maybe even someone within his own group. Having seen

enough gangster movies over the years, I knew when the boss was out of commission, there was sometimes a bloody war for control. Plus, I knew Gina was right. Now that Max was leading the family, the police would start to focus their efforts around him. Did I want to be known in the newspapers as the gangster's new girlfriend? It was enough to make my head spin.

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I walked into Frankie's and the smell of grilled garlic and freshly baked bread greeted me. As always, Frankie looked me up and down and shook her head. Despite her best efforts, I was still too thin for her taste. She handed me off to one of her grandsons who led me through the lounge. Little Zappy waved from behind the bar and yelled out, "Hi, Laura," as I walked through.

Reno waited in a back room at a corner table. When he saw me, he stood up and held out his arms. A happy grin lit up his beautiful face. I hesitated for a moment, then held out my arms and grabbed him in a tight embrace. As always, feelings of being loved and safe washed over me.

Dominic came over with the drinks and took our dinner order. Well, to be more precise, he recited what we always have for dinner and we nodded in agreement.

"Are you still free for the weekend?" Reno asked as he sipped his scotch. "Let's drive down to Rocky Point tomorrow after work and spend the weekend drinking margaritas on the beach. I even got a new beach towel. It will be great for a midnight walk on the beach."

My mind started racing and I had a small panic attack.

Well, what's it going to be? The cop or the criminal? Max or Reno. One or the other.

"Laura," Reno said. "Are you okay? You're blanking out on me again."

"Oh, sorry. I'm doing okay. Actually... Yes, I'm still free this weekend and Rocky Point sounds wonderful."

Okay, so it looks like it'll be the cop. Well, at least for now.

"Perfect," Reno said. "I'll make reservations. Oh, you wanted to talk about something?"

“Well, I did, but my problem seems to have resolved itself.”

As I said this, I felt a wave of relief and my entire body relaxed. I hadn't realized how much this decision was affecting me. I knew the problem hadn't gone away; in fact, by delaying things I'd probably made it worse. But that was a problem for later. For now, I'd try to be content with Reno and do my best to forget about Max. Of course, Max has a way of being thrust into my life, usually when I'm least prepared for it. I doubted this would be the last time I'd need to put Max out of my mind.

“Laura?” Reno said. “Are you sure you're okay?”

“Oh, sorry, the last few days have been busy. My mind keeps wandering.”

Reno held up his scotch.

“To our weekend in Rocky Point. Who knows? Maybe this will be the start of a wonderful life together.”

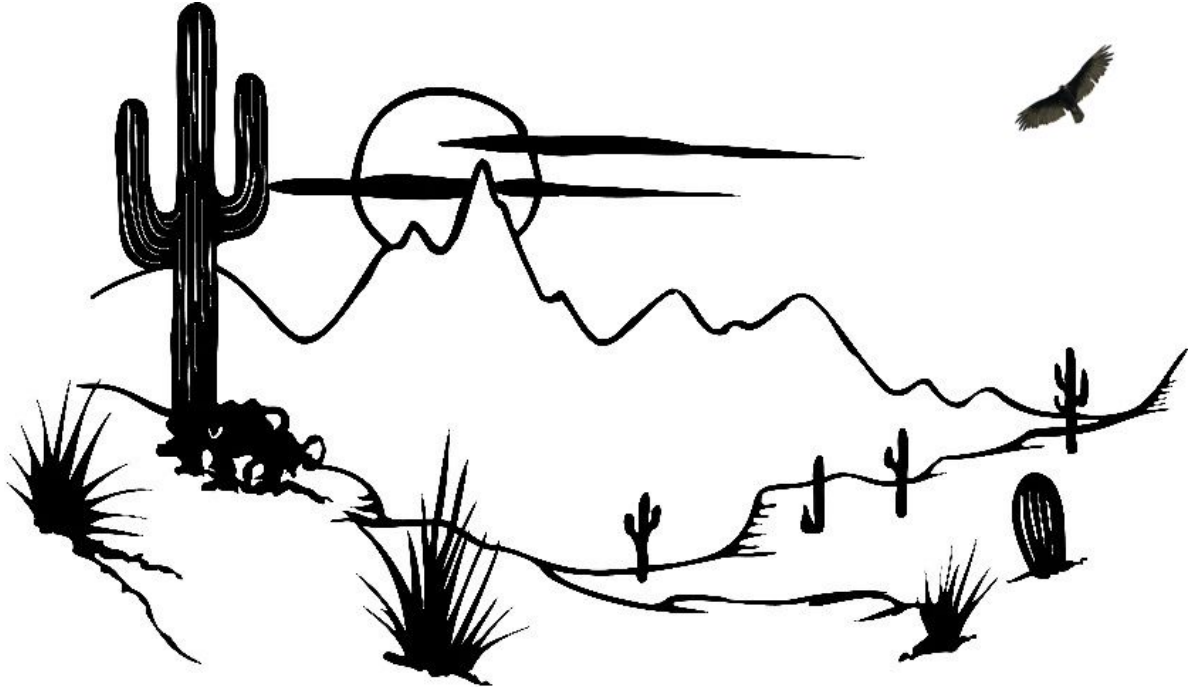
Wonderful life together?

I smiled what I hoped was a happy smile, held up my glass, and clinked it against his.

“To our weekend.”

As a special bonus, please enjoy the first chapter of *Scottsdale Sting*, the fifth book in the Laura Black Scottsdale Mystery series

Scottsdale Sting © 2017 B A Trimmer



Scottsdale Sting

Chapter One

“I have a problem.”

I saw him mouthing the words but my mind was racing and nothing registered.

“Hello,” he said, waving a hand in front of my face. “I have a problem. Can you help me?”

“Ah, okay, sure,” I heard myself say. I looked over at Sophie. She looked up from her desk with a glazed look in her eyes. I’m sure I looked much the same.

I glanced back at the beautiful man standing in the office reception area and my heart started pounding again, although my brain still hadn’t caught up with what my eyes were seeing. The man had a look of frustrated acceptance on his face. Apparently, he’d been through this scenario many times before.

“You’re Stig Stevens,” Sophie said with a dreamy and distant tone to her voice. “You’re *The Hammer*. I’ve seen all of your movies. You’re amazing.”

The man sighed and took a deep breath. “Yes,” he said in his unique eastern European accent. “I’m Stig Stevens, but I still need your help. I need to speak with Leonard Shapiro right away. It’s very urgent.”

“Um, unfortunately he’s in court this morning,” I said. “He won’t be back until later this afternoon. Maybe we can help.”

Stig Stevens looked down at Sophie and then over at me. I could tell he was having his doubts.

“Could there be two attorneys in Scottsdale named Leonard Shapiro?” he asked. “I’ve probably got the wrong one.”

“Nope,” Sophie said. “There’s only one and you’re in his office.”

Stig sighed with acceptance. “Fine. I need to discuss an important legal issue with Leonard. He was recommended as being the best attorney in Scottsdale. It’s something very confidential and I need to talk with him as soon as possible.”

“Well,” I ventured. “If you’re looking to hire Lenny, we could set you up as a client of the firm, then we’d also be covered by the attorney-client privilege. I’m one of the investigators here and Sophie’s the paralegal. You could tell us what you need and we could get a start on it.”

“I’m not sure attorney-client privilege works that way,” Stig said, but Sophie had already pulled out a standard contract and started filling in the blank spaces.

“Here,” she said as she finished the first page and handed it to him to sign while filling in the second page. “I loved you in *Hammer Fall*. I think that was my favorite.”

Stig hesitated a moment, picked up a pen from Sophie’s desk, and signed the document. He then signed the next three pages and initialed several more. Sophie already had her stamp out and was notarizing even as Stig was signing. She then pulled her register from her desk and opened it.

“Um, it’s not like I don’t know who you are,” Sophie said. “But I’ll need some ID for the notary book. Almost anything official with your picture on it will work.”

Stig reached into his pocket and came up empty. He then patted himself down, searching his pockets in vain.

“Shit, I didn’t bring my wallet. Hold on, I’ve got my passport in the Hummer.”

He went out the front door and the office became very quiet. Sophie and I looked at each other and started laughing.

“Gina’s not going to believe we had Stig Stevens in the office,” Sophie said. “She’s going to shit kittens when she finds out she missed him.”

Stig returned and handed Sophie his passport. Her hands shook slightly as she took it and jotted down the information in the notary book. She looked down at the passport, then reluctantly handed it back.

“Okay, you’re now a client of the firm,” I said. “How can we help you?”

Stig frowned. “It’s something you need to see in person to get the full impact. Come with me if you want to see what’s going on. As soon as Leonard comes in, we’ll need to work with him on an appropriate response.”

“Okay,” I said. “Show us.”

“It’s over at my house. If you’re the investigator, I’ll drive you.”

I heard Sophie making a noise and looked over to see her pleading with her eyes.

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “But we should probably take Sophie too. She often spots things I miss.”

“Fine,” he said. “Bring whoever you need, but I need to have this taken care of right away.” He looked down at Sophie. “My vehicle is big, but it only has two seats. Take your car and follow us. Do you know where I live? It’s off of Yucca Road and Cameldale Way.”

Sophie nodded her head. Even in a city full of luxury homes, Stig Stevens had one of the biggest and most famous.

I went back to my office, gathered up my things, and returned to reception. I followed Stig out the front door to the street. Sophie locked the door behind us, then headed out the back to her yellow Volkswagen convertible in the alley behind the office.

Stig and I walked half a block down the street to a huge army-style Hummer, painted in desert camouflage, which was taking up two parking spaces. I looked at the license plate and wasn’t surprised it read *HAMMER*. We climbed in and he started it up. The vehicle throbbed with power as he backed out of the parking spaces. Sophie came around the corner and we all headed to Stig Stevens’ house.

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My name is Laura Black. I’m a Scottsdale native and grew up in the Granite Reef section of what is now unofficially called South Scottsdale. I got both a degree and a husband at Arizona State University, which is in Tempe, about five miles to the south. Until three years ago, I’d been married and working as a bartender at a place called Greasewood Flat. When the marriage ended, I decided I needed to do something different. Sophie suggested I apply for the open investigator position at Halftown, Oeding, Shapiro, & Hopkins, the downtown Scottsdale law firm where she worked as the admin and paralegal. I got the job and have worked there ever since. So far, I’ve managed to stumble my way through it without getting fired. It pays the bills, but I don’t think I’ll make a career out of it.

The hours are worse than bartending and I've been threatened with bodily harm more than once. The only thing that makes it worthwhile is sometimes I can really help someone who's in a tight spot. That alone seems to make the rest of it feel worthwhile.

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Stig drove the big Hummer north on Scottsdale Road to McDonald Drive. He then turned west and three minutes later, we came to Cameldale Way. Here he turned south toward the high-dollar mega mansions nestled against the northeast side of Camelback Mountain. I'd only been in this neighborhood a couple of times over the years, but each time I'd been impressed. Even though this is the part of the city where property values are the absolute highest, each of the houses sits on several acres. I guess when you're living in a house like this, you don't want to know you even have neighbors.

As we neared his estate, Stig pushed a button on the dashboard and a black gate in a high-security fence swung open. We turned onto a narrow driveway that wound up the base of Camelback Mountain. We drove through a beautiful park-like setting for almost two hundred yards before coming to a stop at a paved courtyard in front of a huge house. A red Ferrari, a purple Maserati, and an orange McLaren were parked in front of a detached garage that had six sets of double doors. As Stig parked the Hummer between the sports cars, Sophie's Volkswagen came to a stop behind us.

The house was as big as Muffy Sternwood's, maybe bigger, and was beautiful. Its colors were artfully designed to fit in well with the surrounding mountains and desert. The landscaping equaled anything found at the golf resorts.

"Holy shit," Sophie said as she got out of the car and looked up at the mansion. "It's huge."

"Come on," Stig said. "This won't take long."

He led us over to the set of double entrance doors. Each was at least nine feet high and five feet across. He punched a string of numbers into a control pad next to the door and a light on the panel switched from red to green. From inside the door came a metallic snapping sound as the internal locking mechanism released. Stig opened the massive door and we went inside.

“Holy shit,” Sophie said again as we stepped into the foyer.

A set of curved marble stairs wound up on either side of the massive space to an upper floor balcony. The walls were covered in dark wood paneling and the ceiling was supported by thick marble columns. A sparkling chandelier, probably ten feet across, hung down from the high ceiling. The marble floor was so shiny it acted sort of like a mirror, making the space look even bigger, and making me glad I wasn’t wearing a skirt.

Whenever I’m in a home this big it always seems more like a hotel than a house. I couldn’t imagine actually living in something this large.

Stig led us through a central archway, then down a hallway that opened onto an interior atrium. This led down to a lava rock wall and tropical foliage display, set next to a hotel-sized indoor-outdoor pool. The far wall of the atrium had a large glass panel with a water passage separating the inside part of the pool from the outside. The way the space was designed reminded me a little of the lobby of the Tropical Paradise. Thinking of that reminded me of Max and I felt a brief pang of sadness.

As we got closer to the pool, Stig looked down at the water and hesitated. He seemed to be searching for something and when he didn’t find it, he went through an ornate wooden door with a large stained-glass panel that connected to the outside patio. Sophie looked at me and shrugged her shoulders. We followed him through the door.

The patio and the area surrounding the outside portion of the pool was immaculate. The pool was blue and inviting. The negative edge feature, bordered on each side by a huge queen palm, looked out over a magnificent view of north Scottsdale and the McDowell Mountains beyond. A cabana sat next to the pool with an outdoor kitchen, stainless-steel barbeque grill, and a large TV mounted to the wall. The patio appeared to have been professionally landscaped in a desert oasis theme with pigmy date palms, sago palms, and trimmed bougainvillea scattered around it. Stig walked over to the edge of the pool and again stared down into it. He looked up at us with a trace of panic in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“An hour and a half ago, there was a body in the pool. A dead body. Now it’s gone.”

Sophie looked up and her eyes were big. “A dead body? Are you serious? Holy shit!”

~~~~~

Ten minutes later, we had returned to the courtyard in front of the house. Stig was shaken by the events of the last couple of hours and he looked a little lost.

“Look,” I said. “You aren’t a doctor. We’ll need to check with Lenny, but legally, I don’t think you can be expected to determine if it was a dead body in your pool or not. It could have been someone alive floating in your pool and they only looked dead, or it could have been a dummy someone threw in as a joke.”

“That would be a pretty sick fucking joke if someone did that,” Sophie said.

“I might not be a doctor,” Stig said. “But it looked pretty dead to me.”

“Tell me about the body,” I said. “Was it a man or a woman?”

“It was a man,” Stig said. “He was face down, but he appeared to be about my size, somewhere in his forties or fifties.”

“White, black, Hispanic?”

“White, I think. The body was floating inside the house next to the glass that separates the inside part of the pool from the outside. I didn’t get too close, but from where I was standing, he was sort of purple and a little blotchy.”

Sophie started making a sound like Marlowe coughing up a hairball. “Excuse me,” she said and disappeared back into the house.

“The area around the pool looked pretty wet,” I said. “Was it like that when you saw the person in the pool?”

“I don’t remember. Once I saw the body, it’s all I focused on.”

“Tell me about your movements last night and this morning. How did you find the body and what were you doing before then?”

“I came downstairs about nine. Before that, I’d been asleep. I woke up about eight, took a shower, and got dressed. I was coming downstairs to make myself some breakfast.”

“What about last night?” I asked.

“I had a party here. There were maybe twenty-five or thirty people. A dozen people came over early to watch the Cardinals game. By six o’clock, most of the people were here for cocktails. By ten, everyone was either dancing or in the pool. They’d mostly cleared out by one or one thirty and that’s when the rest of my staff went home. I left a few of the stragglers down here to keep going and I went up to bed.”

“Were any of your staff here before you got up? Perhaps they saw something?”

“No, I always give everyone Mondays off. It’s sort of a tradition from back when things were more active here on the weekends. I’ll have people here again starting tomorrow.”

“Do you have any security cameras? Either inside or outside?”

“No. When I had the house built, it was before you could have cameras broadcast to your computer or phone. Everything back then ran on videotape. It seemed like more of a headache than it was worth and I’ve never gotten around to putting in a new system.”

“Alright,” I said. “Let’s go back and talk with Lenny. Then he can figure out the best way to handle this.”

~~~~~

Sophie took off in her car while Stig and I drove back into Old Town Scottsdale together. We looked for two adjoining parking spaces, but when we only found one open space in front of an art gallery, Stig parked there anyway; the Hummer halfway up on the sidewalk.

“Won’t you get a ticket doing that?” I asked.

“Before today, would you have known who this Hummer belongs to?”

“Well, sure. There aren’t many original Army Hummers painted like this with a license plate that says *HAMMER*.”

“The Scottsdale police also know who it belongs to. I love driving it, but it’s so big I usually end up parking like this. I do a lot of charity events around Scottsdale – many of them for the police. I’ve never gotten a ticket.”

We got out and walked down the block to the office. Sophie had already unlocked the front door and was holding it open for us. We walked into

reception in time to hear Lenny yelling out from his office.

“Sophie, you can’t take off and leave the office unattended. What if a new client had showed up and wanted to hire us?”

“Um, Lenny,” I said. “Could you come out here for a moment?”

“What?” he shouted.

“We did get a new client today,” Sophie said.

“Oh, really? Who is it?” Lenny stuck his head out of his office and saw Stig Stevens standing next to us. It took a few seconds for his brain to process who he was seeing.

The look on his face was easy to read. First was confusion, then recognition at seeing a famous movie star, then a look that was uniquely Lenny. It was the look of a man calculating how much to charge a wealthy client per hour. Lenny quickly composed himself and walked up to Stig, his hand outstretched, his smooth lawyer persona going.

“Stig Stevens,” Lenny said without a trace of being star struck. “Leonard Shapiro. It’s a real pleasure to meet you. I’m a big fan. *Hammer Down* is one of my all-time favorites. How can we help you today?”

“Mr. Stevens is a new client of the firm,” I said.

I saw the questioning look Lenny gave me.

“A *signed* new client of the firm,” I said. “We were over at his house this morning and we’d like to talk to you about some issues that arose.”

“Very well,” Lenny said. “Let’s go into my office and discuss this in more detail.”

Stig, Sophie, and I followed Lenny into his office. With a glance from Lenny, Sophie went to the wet bar on the far wall, pulled out two glasses, and started dropping ice cubes in each.

“Stig,” Lenny asked. “What will you have to drink?”

“After everything that’s happened today, a Jack Daniel’s would be great,” he said. “You might want to make it a double.”

Sophie poured a double Jack for Stig and a Beam on the rocks for Lenny, then she handed out the drinks. We all sat while Stig took a couple of long sips, then Lenny started the meeting.

“Alright Stig,” he said. “How can we help you?”

“As I’ve already discussed with Laura and Sophie, this morning when I came downstairs at my house, there was a dead body floating in my pool. When we went there to look at it, about an hour ago, it was gone.”

Lenny put up a hand to stop him. “How do you know what you saw was a dead body? You aren’t a medical doctor and I assume you have no formal medical training. Did you perform any sort of hands-on examination? You may have seen something floating in your pool, but from a strict legal standpoint, it doesn’t necessarily mean it was a dead body.”

Sophie glanced at me and smiled. I caught the mental high-five.

“I didn’t examine him at all,” Stig said. “But from the edge of the pool, he appeared to be a male in his forties or fifties and he looked to be dead. He was floating face down so I didn’t get a good look at him. I knew a dead body in my pool would be serious trouble, both from a legal and a PR standpoint, so I called a friend of mine and asked who the best criminal attorney in Scottsdale was. She said it was you and I drove straight over.”

Lenny nodded with a look I’m sure he’s practiced in the mirror. It was a look of concern mixed with sympathy. Two emotions I knew Lenny didn’t possess. “If I could ask, who did you call?”

“It was Margaret Sternwood,” Stig said. “We serve together on several charity boards. She says you’re the best.”

“Of course,” Lenny said. “We helped her out with an issue earlier this year. Yes, we’ll be glad to look into it. We’ll need to track down the body – who it was, the circumstances of the death, if there was a death that is, and most importantly, who killed him and who removed him from your pool. If we find evidence that a crime occurred at your house, we’ll represent you when we notify the police. We’ll also need to review your security arrangements. If it’s possible someone could commit a murder in your home while you were asleep, we can assume you aren’t safe. We’ll need to take steps to ensure you’re protected.”

“It’s not the first break-in I’ve had recently. Last week, when I was at a charity event, someone broke a window and went through the house. The staff apparently scared him away before he could take anything.”

“Did you report the break-in to the police?”

“No. Nothing was missing and until now I thought it was probably a fan; now I’m not sure. As you may know, public image is critical for me. If TMZ finds out my house was broken into, it’ll rate a two-minute news story. If they find out a dead body was floating in my pool, it could quickly turn into a public relations nightmare. I’ve already called my manager, Jerry Phifer. I’ll also need to call my publicist and let her know what happened. She’s responsible for my image.”

“Who is that?” Lenny asked.

“Jeanette Simmons,” Stig said. “She’s a partner at *JBC-RDS*. They’re based out of Los Angeles and they handle a lot of Hollywood A-list clients. I’ll make an introduction.”

Lenny got a strange look on his face, but whatever was bothering him quickly passed. “Alright,” he said. “I’d like to get started on this right away. Let me ask you a few questions. Before this morning, when was the last time you looked at your pool and can verify there was no one floating in it, either alive or dead?”

“It was last night. I had a party at the house for about twenty-five or thirty people. We spent the last couple of hours on the patio and in the pool. Most of the people had left by one or one thirty. At about one thirty I went to bed.”

“And where were you from one thirty this morning until you found whatever it was in the pool?”

“In my bedroom, asleep.”

“Can anyone verify that? Were you alone or was someone with you?”

“I was alone. A few people carried on downstairs after I went to bed, but they were gone when I woke up. The staff took off about one. They won’t be back until tomorrow.”

“Alright, I’ll need the names of everyone at the party and I’ll especially need to know who stayed after you went to bed.” Lenny paused to take a sip of his bourbon. “Now then, for the moment, let’s assume the thing you saw in the pool was indeed a person. Tell me what you observed. You said it looked to be a man in his forties or fifties and he was floating face down.”

“The age is only a guess based on the size and shape of the body.”

“What else could you tell about him?”

“He appeared to be white and maybe six feet two or three.”

“Skinny, fat?”

“I would say athletic, but again, from the back it was hard to tell.”

“How was he dressed?”

“He had on a navy sport coat and tan pants. I don’t remember seeing any shoes. He had short brown hair.”

“Did he look like anyone who was at the party last night?”

Stig thought about it for a moment. “No, none of the men looked like that. This guy was as big as I am, plus I was the only one at the party who was wearing a jacket. Everyone else was dressed in short sleeves.”

“Okay,” Lenny said. “Last question. Any rings, watches, or other jewelry you can remember seeing on the body?”

Stig shook his head. “No. I guess I’m not going to be very helpful with that.”

“It doesn’t matter at this stage,” Lenny said. “Laura will look into it. I might have another investigator assist her. Her name is Gina Rondinelli and she spent several years as a detective with the Scottsdale Police Department. With their help, we’ll get this sorted out. We’ll start digging on our end right away. If you’ll be available later this afternoon, Laura will probably need to talk to you to get some more information.”

“I should be home most of the afternoon,” Stig said.

The meeting ended with handshakes. We then went out to reception where Stig confirmed his contact information including his personal cell phone number and email. He then left through the front door.

“Damn,” Sophie said. “It’s not every day a famous movie star comes in and drags us over to his house to show us a dead body. Kinda disappointing when it wasn’t there.” She looked at me. “How come you’re the only one who gets to find the dead bodies? It’s like you attract them or something. I’d like to find one too.”

“I don’t attract them and trust me, finding them isn’t as much fun as it sounds. We’d still be filling out forms for the police.”

Lenny seemed pleased, but not as excited as I expected him to be.

“Give him a couple of hours to calm down and then re-interview him,” he said. “See if he’s been able to keep his story straight. Keep me up-to-date on what you find out. Although, I’ll be surprised if you come up with anything at all. There’s something wrong with this.”

“I don’t know,” Sophie said. “He seemed pretty sincere when he showed up this morning.”

“Of course he sounded sincere,” Lenny said. “He’s an actor. That’s what they do. But dead bodies don’t suddenly show up in a pool in a wealthy man’s house and then disappear again all by themselves.”

“Why would he do this, if it wasn’t true?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” Lenny said. “But keep in mind it’s been a few years since he had a big hit. He’s an action hero and it’s getting harder to hide the fact he’s almost sixty. It wouldn’t shock me if he’s using us to stir up some publicity for his next picture. Isn’t a new one coming out in a couple of weeks?”

“How would he use us?” I asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Lenny said. “Sophie, take a look in the tabloids. See if there’re reports in any of them that Stig Stevens is fearful for his life or getting death threats, anything like that. Maybe something about police being called in to investigate a break-in or that Stig has a crazed female stalker; it could be anything. If so, don’t be surprised if it also says there’s a Scottsdale law firm checking into it. There’d need to be something like that to give the story an air of credibility.”

“Not a problem,” Sophie agreed. “I’ll round up all I can find.”

Lenny thought for a moment, then looked at me. “On the off chance you do find something, get Gina involved. Running a homicide investigation is what she’s trained to do. She can be our liaison with the police, if it gets that far. If we find anything, we’ll also need to coordinate with Stig’s agent and publicist. They’ll get pissy if we don’t.”

“If the story’s bogus, wouldn’t the agent and publicist be in on it?” I asked. “Besides, if you didn’t believe his story, why did you agree to keep him as a client?”

“There didn’t seem to be a downside for us and you said he’d already signed the client agreement.” Lenny looked at Sophie. “What discount off the standard rate did you give him?”

“Nothing,” Sophie said. “He was in a hurry.”

“Full rate?” The corners of Lenny’s mouth curled up in a smirky smile. “Nice. I haven’t been able to charge the full hourly rate since Margaret Sternwood came in here and that must have been nine or ten months ago.”

“You could have gotten the full rate from Suzie Lu,” I said. “She wouldn’t have thought twice about it.”

Lenny got a look of shock on his face. “What? Are you nuts? I’d been hearing about *Mistress McNasty* for ten years. I wasn’t going to scare her out of the office before the case even started.” He looked at Sophie. “While you’re at it, run a report on the publicist. Let’s see if this is as bad as I think it is.”

Lenny went back into his office just as Sophie’s cell phone rang with Danielle’s ringtone. Hearing it made my stomach clench. I’d met her a month and a half ago while working on an assignment. Since then, she’d become friends with both Sophie and Gina. She’d started out as my friend too, but then I found out she was the daughter of Escobar Salazar, worldwide head of a vicious drug cartel called *Muerte Negro* or in English, the Black Death. After the death of Carlos the Butcher, Danielle began secretly running all criminal activity in Arizona through a man called Sergio. Unfortunately, I’d promised to keep this knowledge to myself. I knew if I didn’t keep my promise, the people I love most in the world would be hurt, or worse.

Sophie answered the phone and spent several minutes laughing and speaking to Danielle in Spanish. When she got off the phone, she looked at me. “I set up a dinner with Danielle for Friday night after work. Hopefully Gina’s free. Danielle asked if you’d be available to come along too.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “With this new assignment, I’m not sure what will happen.”

“What gives? It’s been weeks since you’ve gone out with us. Probably not since the day we got rid of Amber. I think Danielle’s noticed it too. She said she was going to call and invite you herself.”

As if on cue, my cell phone rang with Danielle's ringtone, the old Eurythmics song, *Would I Lie to You?* I walked into the back offices and answered.

"Laura," Danielle said. "It's good to talk to you again. Sophie, Gina, and I are going out to dinner on Friday. I hope you'll come with us."

"Danielle," I said, keeping my voice down so no one could overhear. "I'm keeping my promise and I won't ever say anything, but you know we can't be friends."

"I hope you'll change your mind. You were the one who introduced me to Sophie and Gina. They'll start to wonder what's wrong if you keep avoiding me. There are all sorts of ways to break a promise other than openly talking about it."

"Fine, I'll go to dinner with you, but I'm not sure how happy I'll be able to act."

"Good, that's a start. I honestly like you, Laura. You were the first real friend I made in Arizona and I'm genuinely sorry work has come between us. Oh, I'm restarting negotiations with Max in a few days. I'll want you to let me know Max's reactions to what we propose."

"I don't know how I can do that. I haven't talked with him in a month. Now that he's taken over the group, he won't even see me."

"Of course he'll see you. My informants report he's not romantically involved with anyone else."

At that, my heart sped up a bit. "Alright, let me know when you start the negotiations. I'll try to get together with him and ask him about the talks. Of course, he might not even want to meet with me. He seemed pretty definite about it the last time I talked to him."

"He'll see you," Danielle said. "I can almost guarantee it."

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I hung up with Danielle and went up front. Gina had come in while I was on the phone and Sophie was in the middle of telling her all about our day with Stig Stevens.

"You should have seen it," Sophie said. "I've never been in a house that nice. It was almost as big as Elizabeth's. I could get used to living

somewhere like that. Of course, I'd need plenty of servants. One to cook and a couple to clean. I'd want my house to be spotless for when all my rich friends dropped by. Maybe I'd need a full-time pool boy who'd spend all day bringing me drinks and giving me massages."

"You said there was a dead body?" Gina asked.

"I said we went over there to *look* at a dead body," Sophie said. "It was supposed to be floating in the pool, but when we got there it was gone."

Gina raised an eyebrow and looked at me.

"That's what he said. He woke up, went downstairs, and there was a dead guy floating in his pool. He knows Margaret Sternwood and he called her to see which lawyer she would recommend. Muffy told him about Lenny. Stig came down to the office and we signed him up as a client. When we went to his house to look at the dead body, it was gone."

"Well?" Gina asked, looking at me. "What do you think?"

"Lenny doesn't think there was ever a dead body," I said. "He thinks we're being set up as part of a publicity scheme to get some buzz going about Stig's new movie. I'm not sure I agree with him. It seems strange that Stig Stevens would drive over to a lawyer's to show him a dead body if there wasn't a dead body. I don't think you could make something like that up."

"Yeah," Sophie said. "But who would kill someone in the middle of the night, then come back the next day to move the body? Why wouldn't you move him right away if you didn't want a dead body to be found floating in the pool?"

"I don't know, but it did seem kind of wet around the pool. I don't know if it was wet from the party the night before or from the body coming out."

"What?" Sophie asked. "Are you saying the dead guy came back to life and crawled out of the pool? Sorta like the Walking Dead?"

"No, what I'm saying is, none of this makes sense."

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I spent the next hour in my cubicle finishing up the paperwork on a cheating spouse assignment I'd been working on for the last two weeks. I walked up and gave Sophie the folder. She took it and put it on top of a

stack of folders waiting to be filed. I looked around and noticed there were several other stacks of file folders on the tables and even a stack on one of the chairs.

“You aren’t ever going to file those, are you?” I asked.

“Nope. If I file them, Lenny won’t have a reason to hire a new admin. If he sees the stacks of files, maybe hiring someone will rise to the top of his list.”

I glanced at the clock and saw it was already three o’clock. I went back to my cubicle and called Stig at the number he’d given Sophie. He answered right away. I was still amazed and sort of in shock that I could pick up the phone and actually call Stig Stevens. I asked if we could get together and he said he’d be at his house for the next two hours or so. I let him know I’d be over in twenty minutes.

I grabbed my purse and went out the rear security door to the covered parking in the back alley. As I walked to my car, I broke out in a smile. For the past month, I’d been smiling whenever I drove.

After nine years of driving a reliable, but uninspiring vehicle, I now had a new car. Well, not exactly new, but close enough for me. I pushed the button on my key fob and the lights blinked on a silver Mercedes SL convertible. I opened the door and settled myself into the comfortable leather seat. I turned the key and felt the deep-throated hum as the huge engine fired up. I backed out into the alleyway and hit the button to open the power roof, then sat there for fifteen or twenty seconds, taking in the fact that I now owned such an amazing car.

I looked through a pile of old CD’s I’d tossed on the passenger seat, opened one by Tori Amos, and shoved it in the CD player. It was a beautiful day in Arizona and driving through Scottsdale in my new car couldn’t help but put me in a good mood.

About the Author

Halfway through a successful career in technical writing, marketing, and sales, along with having four beautiful children, author B A Trimmer veered into fiction. Combining a love of the desert, derived from many years of living in Arizona, with an appreciation of the modern romantic detective story, the Scottsdale Series was born.

Comments and questions are always welcome.
Email the author at LauraBlackScottsdale@gmail.com