



**COYOTE
LAUGHING**

S.R. Ruark

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Chapter One

Cactus to the Rescue

The man felt the dream forming from the fog of heavy sleep. He saw unbroken prairie before him with stars brighter than any he had ever seen in the city, he heard the gentle rustle of the wind through the unending grass. There were rocks behind him that looked like a giant child's blocks knocked over... blocks that could be built into towering heights or knocked down again into tumbling ruins. The fire in front of him was small yet his skin could still feel the heat. He looked down with a frown. He remembered going to bed in boxers, but was now wearing a leather breechcloth, leggings and fringed moccasins with geometric patterns done in dyed porcupine quills. He ran a hand down the side of his leg. The leather was soft to the touch. Not like modern leather pants but softer almost cloth-like. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The smell of smoke, grass and air, without a hint of gas or asphalt, filled his lungs.

“Today is the start of the rest of your life.”

Jason opened his eyes, making out the outline of a medium sized yellow dog with a very fluffy tail. The dog sat just outside of the light cast by the crackling fire. Jason raised an eyebrow at the creature, refusing to flinch in the dream.

“Coyote.” Jason was not naming a type of canine but one of his gods, the god of mischief.

A playfully chaotic god in children stories but a seriously scary bad ass of chaotic mayhem. The scary tales were told by the People after the children had been put to bed. Children would grow up soon enough. Coyote was not a god to mess with. Things... tended to happen to those who tried and Jason was not a stupid man. His great grandfather was a shaman and talked to Coyote on a semi regular basis, but Coyote had never deigned to visit Jason.

“Until tonight there was no reason.” The deity said. Coyote moved closer to sit by the fire wrapping his tail around his front paws cat like, across from Jason. Coyote acknowledged the man with a flick of an ear and a large open mouthed canine smile, wider than a normal dog's toothy grin. The fire light made his teeth seem white, wet and very sharp looking. A scary smile.

Jason waited. His father had taught him patience while hunting. Information, he had found was just another type of hunt and Jason was very good at getting information.

Coyote grinned again. "You'll need that patience young one."

"I am not young." Jason was not going to be baited even if his mouth was dry.

"You are not a wise old man nor starting the decade of learning by the People's reckoning either." The tone was amused but slightly condescending.

Jason waited. Young was not an insult; however, the implied insult of stupid did make him grit his teeth, bunching the muscles in his jaw. He blanked his mind from thinking rude things. Gods weren't known for their tolerance with impudent "children".

"Today is the start for the rest of your life." Coyote repeated, looking at him intensely.

"Every day is a start."

"For a new day. Today your life changes."

"I die." He said flatly. The wind blew cold up his spine.

Coyote yipped in laughter. "If you were going to die, I would not be here. No need to tell a dead man to pay attention." A sly look, through narrowed yellowed eyes.

"Thank you for your words of wisdom, Coyote." Jason tried for a calm response.

"It's not for you that wisdom is needed."

"It's not?" Now that piqued Jason's curiosity.

Coyote seemed to smirk. "The one with the sharp teeth." was all he said with a gleam of white teeth.

Jason winced. He hated being bitten. Never knew where some one's mouth had been.

"You'll do, child of stone." Coyote grinned; he rose to his feet and stretched. His paws almost touched the fire as he yawned with his ears back flashing a long jaw of canines at Jason again. The open mouth yawn was wide enough to have unhinged the jaw of a true coyote. With that Coyote turned, his tail wagging slowly as he took a step away, stopping to look coyly over his shoulder at Jason. "One more thing, take tweezers with you today."

With that, the dream splintered and Jason was tossed awake, like a leaf in a strong wind, tumbling back into the real world. Jason sat up in the motel bed smelling of stale smoke and spilled beer, with a taste of smoke from a cedar fire in his mouth and nose.

Tweezers? Jason got up to check his medical kit.

“Hey. Just saw the extra water lily in my pond today.”

“Yep. The fish needed some extra feeding.”

“Think there has been enough feeding. You’ve left a few other plants that need to be cleaned. They’ve started to turn into compost.”

“I’ll get to those in the next day or two.”

“Sooner would be better. Hard to run a business without you leaving your broken toys in my garden.”

“As long as my bank is supplying payment for your business I think you can tolerate a toy or two out.”

Silence for a moment.

“A day. The heat here makes the...plastic melt.”

“A day it is.”

The lines clicked dead. A long finger tapped the top of the cell phone. Yep, clean up was a bitch, and sometimes toys just shouldn’t be allowed at all. Time to do some house cleaning.

It wasn't the vaults themselves that were the issue; it was the first attempt at maneuvering them through the warehouse that pulled a muscle in the tall man's back. Each vault weighed 2,474 lbs and stood at 62". The floor pallet jack he had rented couldn't handle the load, causing him to tear a muscle while trying to un-stick the pallet jack from underneath the T30.

He didn't swear or kick the vault, but settled for glaring at the damn thing for a full 5 minutes while his back spasmed. He had to go back to the rental store for a pallet jack truck, not just a damn floor pallet jack, putting him behind schedule. Three hours later he was finally back on schedule with a rental truck and a rented pallet jack.

He joked with the sales guy that his wife's new garden stone fishpond was more than he and the boys could carry.

"Yeah, those women. Always wanting the biggest and heaviest they can get." the counter guy said with sympathy. "Tell the slave driver she better be putting out some good laying for the work you're doing."

"That down payment was paid this morning!" the man said with a self-satisfied grin.

They both laughed while the pallet jack truck was loaded into the rental van.

"Have it back by 5." the counter guy said "And I hope your second "payment" is as good as the first!" the sales guy called out laughingly.

"It will be, it will be!" He waved out the window, heading towards the highway. The naproxen was wearing off and he would need to find something stronger. He had 6 safes to arrange, then wire up with explosives. Some things needed to be wired right to counter the people wired wrong.

"Carrie, are we almost there?" I asked, flicking the cigarette butt out the open window, not quite yelling to be heard. Carrie's car was a small blue thing without AC and rattled like a monkey in a cage, hopped up on speed. The CD player had been stolen 3 months ago so there wasn't even music to relieve the tedium of a boring drive in a bad car. The ripped vinyl seats were not the most comfortable, either, but Carrie loved her car more than any of the many boyfriends and one-night stands she's had since getting it. She even nicknamed the POS, Little Blue.

"Almost! If your directions are right we should be hitting the greenhouse in another minute or two." Carrie's hair was blowing all over her face and shoulders. The sunset was turning her hair more strawberry then blond.

The road shimmered in the heat of the desert sun, making the car hotter and stickier than usual. The sun was to our backs, yet nothing had cooled down. The open windows made talking in anything other than an almost shout pretty hard, but the blowing wind didn't cool us much either. God, I hated her car but anything flashier was sure to attract unwanted attention, so small and crappy, but running, is what we used.

"Those directions are accurate, slut." I gave an off-handed wave, breezily dismissing her need for minute directions.

"Look bitch, just 'cause..." She tried to laugh, talk and spit out hair at the same time. I grinned back, reaching for another clove cigarette in my deep pockets. The lighter I pulled from my sleeve like a magician with a handkerchief. I loved doing that trick, made me feel like Houdini. The trick was useful in picking up and hiding things as well.

My hoodie was black, long sleeved and had deep front pockets. Comfortable and concealing, enough I could ignore being hot and sticky in favor of those pockets and the arm coverings. Black was just a plus. Besides, it matched my nail polish. I was styling hard as I sucked in a mouth full of the sweet flavored smoke.

"Greenhouse!" I shouted as what looked like an abandoned warehouse complex came into view. I waived my cigarette to the left side of the road, triumphant in being right.

"That?"

"Yep." I shouted smugly. The building looked vaguely promising from far away. The back part of the warehouse was huge, being close to 4 stories tall and about 3 blocks wide. The front had a sloped roof made of the green panels used in greenhouses and only about 20 feet tall; short compared to the back end. Parts of the larger back structure had areas of green panels as well. The very large greenhouse looked abandoned. Yep... we were in the right place.

Now if the guy would sell to us, we should be set for at least a month and would be able to pay next semester off in one big chunk instead of pieces. That meant more time for studying and not trying to hustle the next decent sale. I liked my 3.4 GPA, but it was a bitch to maintain while having a regular job, a side job and still going to school full time. I was almost salivating at the thought of just being able to study most nights and not hit the clubbing/frat party scene.

The gravel was loud under her not-quite-balding tires. There was only one battered truck to the left of the front building, almost hidden behind the towers of leaning pallets and the fading light. It was hard to tell the color from the road, but I was betting black, maybe dark blue.

"See any cameras?" She shouted.

"Do I look like I can see 100 yards into the distance bitch? And, no!"

"Yay!" Carrie pulled in, declining to drive up to the front door. Instead, we parked next to the mountain of pallets, 4 feet from the dark blue battered truck. Neither of us wanted to park in front. The side door was probably the loading door we would be using, possibly even the back door. That and Carrie really didn't want her car photographed in front of anything that might have surveillance on the front door. Didn't matter the side door might have surveillance, though we didn't see any cameras in either spot... just no front door for her. Her car, her idiosyncrasies. I just didn't like parking in front as it advertised a bit too much of who was where.

I pushed my hair back with a hand trying to get it looking not as fly away as Carrie's. Being jaw length, while traveling in her car, had its advantages.

"Nice dye job by the way." Carrie said, pocketing her keys while slinging her cutesy little purse over her shoulders. Leather I like, but baby blue leather with flowers, I rolled my eyes at that thing. Could she get any cutesier?

"Thanks."

"I thought the dark blue was better but the brown works well. Makes your hips look smaller." She giggled.

I glared at her as I got out of her car. "It's auburn, bitch, and the blue was waaay too distinctive, too memorable." I made a face; I had liked the blue better too. I had gotten better tips for not looking like so many other blond sorority bimbos waiting tables, the blue had definitely been great for tips. "And when you can get into anything other than a 2x mom jean, come talk to me about my size 10 hips!"

Carrie giggled again. Some days I won the bitch game, some days she did. So far, she was three up on me today, but the night was young. I grinned back at her. Game on!

We walked around to the front of the building and went up the warped wooden steps. Carrie's flowered flip-flops made minimal noise clapping around, my dark Keds, less so. There was an old fashioned bell over the door that made a huge clanging sound as we came in.

"Oh my God! We've stepped back into the 1960s!" Carrie was in awe. Her head swinging back and forth to cover the old west style minimalist décor. The room was obviously old with faded to grey wood walls and floor. The floor was made of wood slats, which were tongue and groove, if I could judge anything, and not cheap fake wood floor paneling. Lots of wear and tear, from the scuff marks and ingrained dirt, but in good repair still. The four foot high wood front desk, held an old metal register, the type with huge brass keys that took 3 men to carry. The one jarring, out-of-place item was the coke machine next to another door to the left of the front door. The hum was slight, but noticeable in the quiet. The smell of fertilizer was a bit overpowering, blocking the other scents as too faint to smell.

"Where are the deer antlers? Can't have retro cowboy without deer antlers!" Carry said mockingly.

"I don't believe in killing for clothing or decoration. Can I help you?" Came a voice to our left, as we were marveling over the antique decor. We both jumped, though Carrie was the only one to squeal in surprise. The overall impression was long hair, mud splattered wife beater and blue jeans. The old hippy was wiping his hands on a rag, peering through small oval glasses. We both blinked. This was not quite what either of us had expected.

"Umm... Sorrrrry." Carry stuttered.

Carrie stood on her tiptoes a couple of times nervously. Her impressive cleavage would have given her black eyes if not well restrained. "Make the floor bounce why don'tcha?" I said sideways to Carrie.

"Ohhh, bitch!" She punched my shoulder with a girly hit, nervousness causing her to be sillier than usual. Buying from new dealers was not Carrie's strong suit. After she knew them a bit, they were the best of friends, in soooo many ways.

"Ladies?" The man pulled out a slightly cleaner cloth to rub over his glasses. Without his glasses, I had to downgrade his age by about 15 years.

Carrie bumped my shoulder again. "Err...we're here to buy some plants for our dorm room." I said crossing my arms over my less impressive chest. "Something good." I was using the phrase Tony had given to me.

"What type of plants are you looking for? Low water maintenance or easy to grow? Something that'll survive beer being thrown over it regularly?" There was a hint of a grin. He put the eye cleaning rag in his pocket, holding the glasses out at arm's length to view the lenses.

"Something good... that goes with beer." I said.

"And nachos, or cereal." Carrie added. I glared at her. "Munchies." she amended. Again we were going by the code phrase, if out of order and by more than one person. A ball gag was something I really wish I had now for her mouth though.

"Plants don't usually eat nachos or cereal though we have a good selection of garden plants that are edible. Better for nachos, not so much for cereal. The strawberry plants might be what you're looking for." There was a more pronounced grin as he put his glasses back on. He was having fun at our expense and enjoying making us squirm. The man's shoulders were starting to be more relaxed as he kept talking.

Carrie and I exchanged glances. Were we really in the right place?

We looked back at the hippy again. He was frowning as he looked out the window. "Why don't you girls go into the greenhouse and start looking for some plants you might like. I'll be with you in a moment to help you with your selection for beer and smoking."

I blinked. That was what Tony said was the right counter phrase. All very cloak and dagger. I had laughed at the time, not so much now though. "Umm... ok. We'll look for something sturdy then."

"Try the cactuses." He motioned us to the door behind him and moved to behind the counter. I thought I heard a slight click as the door closed behind us.

Giggling like the collegiate girls we were, all cloak and dagger tough, we walked into a greenhouse the size of a football field. Ok, maybe not that long but damn did it make me feel small! The room was in a deep green twilight from the roof panels and the dying sunlight outside. The sound of the cowbell over the front door banging made us both jump

“More customers for beer and smokes!” Carrie whispered. After a nervous laugh at our own jumpiness, we kept going forward exploring. I glanced upwards to see huge light fixtures hanging from the rafted roof between the glass panes that were over the sprinklers still dripping. Again, Carrie and I exchanged looks. There was a bunch of regular garden plants here. Not a cannabis plant anywhere in sight.

“You sure this is...”

“Yes! Right place. Right phrase!”

“Then where is the crop?”

“In his back pocket?” I gave her a roll of the eyes. “Do I look like I know where he’d be keeping a cash crop in this freaking warehouse in the first 10 minutes of walking in?”

The almost silence was pervasive. No music, no dogs, nothing I would associate with a pot growing operation. Our voices were getting quieter and quieter to match the surroundings even though there weren't any other people here.

"What keeps this guy from getting robbed regularly?!" she stage whispered.

"Maybe he has a room full of slutty bimbos like you to distract anyone who comes to do bad things?" I asked sweetly.

"Bitch!" she giggled though, as if the thought of clones like her being a security force were one she liked.

If he had any plants or crop to sell us, it was very well hidden so far. The plants, he did have were garden variety or landscaping, laid out in rows of 100 feet long on low wooden tables. The wooden planks between the tables were less muddy than under the tables but the smell was still fertilizer, wet dirt and green plants. I took a deep breath. "I want to be a pot grower when I grow up!"

"So you can be Ms. Old Hippy chick?" Carrie asked.

"If I got to smoke everything as a tester, hell yeah!" We both giggled at that.

We started moving down the rows towards a large upright cactus thingy. Several types of prickly plants and plants that weren't spiky but had thick fleshy leaves and fleshy flowers had no scent laid out on the low tables next to the huge cactus thing. I reached out to one plant that looked weirdly phallic.

“Think we found the cactus.” I hissed in pain, hastily pulling back a stabbed finger after trying to pet one of the plants.

“Ya think?” Came Carrie’s retort, while I sucked on my bleeding finger.

“City girl here, cum guzzling farm bitch!” I snapped at her from around my finger.

"Ooh! Getting creative there. Almost eloquent in your pain. Hey look!" Carrie whispered to me holding up a short round of cactus with lots of long thick spines in a small square of black plastic. "The most prick you've had in a week!"

"Bitch!" I hissed back grinning as Carrie giggled. "You're the only slut I know who'd go for something that small."

"Ouch!" She giggled. “How about this one?” Another small cactus with a main trunk and two arms branching upwards, like a man being held up at gunpoint. Not so heavily spined but enough so to be painful if touched by bare skin. "One for both holes and your clit." She started giggling even more.

"Nah, too straight." I said with a shrug and a sly look. "I want one with a little more curve in the arms. Something to fill your mouth and both ears!"

Carrie started to snicker so badly, she dropped the plant half an inch from her toes. The plastic pot cracked on the wooden boards and spilling out the dirt and the cactus. She jumped back with a squeal of alarm.

"Carrie!" I hissed, getting on my knees trying to clean up the dirt and plant. "Help me before we're thrown out!" She started hopping from one foot to the other, shaking out the dirt in her flip-flops making the boards bounce and creek. I glared up at her as the boards kept bouncing in time with her hopping making the cactus and pot bounce in separate directions away from me.

"I'll get dirty!" she whined making a face, putting her manicured hands behind her back like a 3 year old hiding a cookie.

"Chica, you're already dirty. This at least washes off!" I hissed up at her, making a growly face. Wrinkled nose and bared teeth, the works. And it worked!

"Bitch!" She laughed but got down on her hands and knees, careful of her sorority style manicured nails, to help with the dirt and plant.

The boards were dry with caked on mud, feeling somewhat pebbly through the jeans on my knees. The dirt was scattered all over, mixing with what was already on the ground. I didn't want the hippy guy to run us off without at least letting us talk. As I was trying to sweep the dirt from the pot into my hands, Carrie was sweeping it over the boards into the damp dirt underneath the tables. For some reason this working not together, set us to giggling harder.

I carefully put the handful of dirt I had back in the broken cactus pot. The cactus was a bit more problematic. The roots were shallow but the top of the damn thing was covered in spines, making the task of trying to get a hold of it almost impossible. I pulled the sleeve of my hoodie down over my hand, to get a very careful hold of the plant. The thorns were noticeable but not painfully so, as it would have been if using my bare hand. I didn't want another throbbing finger or fingers as this plant was small, but it required more than one finger to hold.

I heard a soft pop then another. The sound froze me in place. Carrie was still giggling until she looked at my face. "Oh my god, your face, what?" I slapped my free hand over her mouth; I could feel my eyes growing huge and goose bumps racing up my skin. Friday nights were our crime story, popcorn and cheap wine nights. Carrie knew gunfire this way. I knew it from a few closer encounters that were far more real than TV.

Cocking my head toward the front office, I waited for the next sound. We heard the bell over the door clanging. The sound of gunfire was louder. Not silenced this time.

I slowly removed my hand putting a finger to my lips. Carrie's eyes got huge and she stuffed her palm into her mouth biting down. I could just hear a small whimper starting. I wanted to stuff a hand in my mouth to do the same thing but was still holding the stupid cactus caught in my sleeve. Fucking hate, those damn things!

I thrust my chin at her and to the left. She nodded. She would take the left side and I would take the right. We crawled under the plant tables hoping to hide behind the gallon jugs with plants under there. We should be out of sight to the casual observer looking down the rows. The cactus would not come off my sleeve. I tried to ignore it, getting under cover being paramount.

I crawled and scooped my butt around the containers finding a spot where I could lay on my side so my head was lower than the bucket while nothing stuck into the rows. Carrie had to move a couple of containers to the side. The sound was a soft grinding whisper of plastic on dirt. I prayed it was non-carrying. If we got shot or killed due to her fat ass, I swear I was going to kill her.

The greenhouse door, from the front office, opened with a swoosh. Someone wasn't concerned with being heard, I thought irreverently. The sounds of the front office being ransacked came through the open door. There were several voices heard as drawers were opened and banged around.

"Boss! We found 2 other cars." A soft tenor.

“Nope. Should be only one. All the others left at 5pm.” The voice was a low growly baritone. I shivered. “Looks like he may have had more company than we thought.” The voice was moving from the front office to the greenhouse. “We’ll need to look around anyway.”

“Fuck! There was supposed to be only the one guy. How the hell did we end up with twenty thousand?!” This voice had a higher pitched edge than the first tenor, which grated on the ears.

“Stop the damn whining Renniks. And don’t shoot unless you need to this time. Might need to ask a few questions.” The baritone snapped the sound running down my spine. There was scuffing of shoes on the hardwood then soft shushing as they stepped into the greenhouse.

Three people at least, with guns. Carrie’s eyes were huge. Mine were getting larger as well. I chewed my lower lip for a second, tasting blood as a dry spot cracked and split. We were pretty well hidden from casual sight and it sounded like these guys were going to be moving further into the warehouse complex. I motioned for Carrie to wait for my signal.

Carefully I raised my head just over the lip of the plastic pots. Three men. No telling whose voice matched with whose. One man was short, I’m talking my height short. Five foot five and that was generous with his platform shoes on. Couldn’t tell what type of gun it was, but the John Wayne wannabe actually had a gold finish on it. Looking to be Mary Sue with a big gun, I thought disdainfully, or a rat terrier in a suit. Either way I bet he was compensating for a small dick.

The other guy had dirty dishwater blond hair, flying across his face. Tall, not pudgy, so the padding had to be muscle. *Carrie’d blow him in a sec*, floated across my mind, almost making me giggle. Hell, I’d do him in a heartbeat with the jeans hinting at a really nice tight ass. This one carried a Glock which looked to be a part of his hand as his fingers were. I marked him as dangerous... doable but dangerous.

The man that followed behind made the rat terrier and the long hair model look like pussies on a playground. Tall like 10 feet - ok my mind was gibbering at this point but really tall - he had to duck through the doorway tall. White hair. Not silver but old man white on a young man’s face. A face that had character, as Nonni used to say. Enough character, I thought, to shoot a man casually while drinking a cold one. Casual in the killing like Ramon. High cheekbones and craggy lines. His hooded eyes didn’t seem to miss anything, sweeping back and forth over the greenhouse. I slumped back down slowly. Fast movements attracted more attention, Rojo always said.

Footsteps came closer. A soft whisper on the dirty floor boards, from one pair and a clicking of heels following closely. I froze in place counting. Two heading towards the side door and one back into the front room. They passed at the head of the plant row we were at and opened the side door. When the two who had passed didn't find anyone, they would do a closer sweep. Our options were getting worse. Now or never it was.

I looked to Carrie. She could count as well. With a quirk of a brow and a finger motion, we were in synch to run. Carrie eased her car keys from her purse and put them in her hands. The engine key held in her fingers ready. I loosened the cactus from my hoodie so I held the *bastardo* in hand with my fingernails, ignoring the pointy spines, the closest thing I had to a weapon. Looked like I was running interference so she could get the car started. She motioned to the back of the greenhouse we were in. I shook my head and mimed a lock motion. She made a face at me. We didn't know if the door by the car was locked or not, but the odds of it not being locked and not alarmed were not in our favor. Out the front it was.

I held up 3 fingers. 1...2...3! We scrambled out from under the plant tables and were dashing to the front. I made it to the door leading to the front office first and yanked it open.

I don't know who was more surprised; me or the scary dude with white hair. He yanked back in surprise, taking a half step back. I threw the cactus in my hand as hard as I could at his face. I didn't see the blur of his fist slamming into the side of my head, he was that fast. The cactus however connected to his face. There was a snarl of pain as his hands went to his face trying to pull the hooking spines from his face.

My vision was swimming and I was on the ground, one knee screaming at having taken the brunt of the fall.

Another guy came around the front desk trying to grab Carrie who was right on my heels till I hit the wall of scary dude. He only managed to grab her purse as she freaked out and threw a fist in his face with her shoulder and hip behind it. The strap snapped at the chain connection, sending Carrie rebounding into the doorframe and blondie into tall scary and now bleeding like a stuck pig.

Carrie didn't waste a second. Her hand was on my arm as she pulled me up, by sheer fear, aiming for the door to the outside.

“Run!! Run! Run!!!” Carrie was screaming loud enough in a high-pitched panicking voice as she pulled me with her.

“Fuck fuck fuck!!!!” Was about all I could say under the circumstances, getting my feet under me and trying to run. Everything else was ringing in my ears as white noise.

I was running, staggering fast to be honest, to the car. Carrie shoved me towards the passenger side as she sprinted to the driver’s side. I yanked the door open and dropped into the vinyl seat trying to fumble for the seat belt before she started to drive. Carrie got her POS started. I never got the seat belt to lock as I could barely register anything as my eyes were swimming in tears from the fist to the head punch. Carrie floored the car in reverse sending me into the dashboard. I saw stars again before the car’s motion threw me into the door then into the seat as she spun and took off down the freeway we had come up not that long ago.

I heard gunshots and twisted in the seat in a knee jerk reaction to the sound. The sawed-off John Wayne was flying out of the front office, his coat and tie flying in the wind. He tried to shoot from the hip, but the sun setting into his squinting eyes kept him from making a connection with the car.

“That’s right you bastards! You can shoot us, but we still got away from you first!” I screamed at him. I think he heard it or maybe just me working both hands up and down, flipping him a double bird. He looked shocked, then really pissed off behind his knock off ray-bans. His hands were shaking, sending his shots even wilder.

The tall white haired guy came out. With blood on his face looking as if he were crying blood, he raised a fucking hand cannon with one hand steadying with the other hand and took careful aim.

My eyes got HUGE. “Carrie DUCK!” I screamed throwing myself into the front seat well. My ass hit the floor hard but not as hard as my head hitting the dashboard, making me bite my tongue. I really hate the taste of blood.

Carrie threw herself sideways into the seat where my ass had just been, while her hands stayed on the steering wheel. The shots were hitting is an almost continuous line. The window shattered into millions of tiny cutting shards. Poor Little Blue started to buck and thump from all the shots taken. Carrie was screaming while driving by braille on the road. I was just clenching the bottom of the seat with my knees under my chin and Carrie’s head on my shins and feet. Nothing I could do to help Carrie or myself now.

Then silence. I pulled myself up cautiously to look out the nonexistent back window. Carrie hunched in her seat to not present too much of a blond headed target. The men were barely dots in the background. Either we out-distanced their guns or he ran out of bullets. Either way we were safe for the moment. Fucker, I

thought, thinking of the white haired craggy faced man, rubbing my bruised backside, hope those damn cactus spines take out your eyes!

The bleeding man watched the escaping VW in annoyance. He reached for the quick load magazine on the right side of his holster.

“Fucking dick sucking bastards!” the small man screamed over and over again, dry firing the oversized gun in his hand.

“Renniks.” Comanche said calmly. The short man continued to scream and swear jumping up and down. Comanche moved into his personal space. “Renniks.” Comanche’s voice boomed into Renniks ear.

“What?!” screamed Renniks, startled, turning towards the much taller man.

“Shut up.” The deep voice rumbled through the air in a menacing tone that needed no profanity to make Renniks swallow hard.

“Yes boss.” Renniks looked down meekly, but his lips still pulled back in a primal snarl of rage at the two girls who got away.

Comanche looked down at him for a moment before turning towards the other two. Renniks waited until Comanche had turned away before redirecting his anger towards the group’s leader. He glared surreptitiously and shot the finger while fumbling to re-holster his gun. He only thought the words he wanted to say, having learned the hard way and a couple of black eyes how good Comanche’s hearing really was.

“Nick, take Renniks and pick up the two girls.” Comanche said to the longhaired blond.

“Girls?!” Renniks squeaked in outrage. “You got jumped by girls?” He couldn’t hide the derision in his voice for shit.

Comanche looked over his shoulder with bleeding eyes, growling at Nick. “Girls who outsmarted you, gave Cubby a black eye and shoved a cactus in my face.”

“Alive or dead boss?” the blonde-haired guy asked, looking Comanche in the eyes, re-holstering his gun smoothly. Unlike Renniks, he had no need to see where the holster was. He could re-holster by touch alone. The gun, an extension of his body, not just a tool.

“Alive. We need to know how much of the warehouse they saw or if they have any information.”

“I have their purses if that helps?” Cubby, the heavysset, dirty blonde-haired person spoke up from the warehouse doorway, hesitantly.

“Driver’s license?” Comanche asked, diverting his gaze to the weakest link of his team.

“I...” Cubby fumbled with a small blue leather purse, unzipping the top flap to search the interior cautiously.

“Girls don’t store used tampons in their purse.” Renniks said derisively to Cubby with lips pulled back into a sneer.

Cubby flipped him a left-handed bird while pulling out the requested identification. “Got it!”

“Good. Find out what you can and the likely spots they might go to ground to.” Comanche nodded his approval.

Comanche headed toward the truck, Nick following him.

“Hoss.”

Comanche merely looked over his shoulder, as he pulled open the back door of the quad cab, waiting for Nick to finish.

“Their car was really fucking shot up. They aren’t making it far.”

“And?” Comanche pulled out a large leather rucksack, reaching inside for the square plastic medical kit.

“Renniks will beat the crap out of either or both of them. Possibly killing ‘em if he gets anywhere close.”

“What are you saying, Nick?”

“He’s got the temper of Mike Tyson on speed. We’re not going to get shit if he kills them.” Nick said with a sideways look. The look he got when his brains were engaged for more than just taking orders or herding Renniks.

Comanche gave an amused grin then winced as the smile crinkled his face, pushing the cactus quills a little deeper. Nick could see the muscles bunch in Comanche’s jaw as the man bit back any verbal acknowledgment of the pain.

Comanche reached for the tweezers and some Neosporin, flipping the passenger side mirror down. He raised the tweezers to pull the first quills. “I suggest you let Renniks know how much we need the girls alive and... cooperative.” He gave Nick a heavy look.

Nick swallowed heavily. “How much latitude?”

“I want them alive. Both of them.” Comanche held Nick’s gaze for a moment more before going back to pulling out quills. Only the flare of nostrils gave away how much pain and irritation he was feeling.

“Will do Hoss.” Nick stepped away from the car, turning to speak with Renniks. He pulled out a pair of fingerless gloves from his back pockets. Words

didn't always sink in with Renniks. Sometimes a little incentive helped when applied with the proper persuasive fist.