

CHAPTER 1

A blond woman opened the door, her swollen left eye shining with the rich color and texture of an overripe eggplant. Dried blood trailed from her twisted nose, over her split lip, and onto her faded Disney Cinderella t-shirt. Purple, green, and yellow bruises on her arms and legs documented a history of abuse.

“Jesus Christ! That looks like it hurts.” I stood on her doorstep in Phoenix’s Sunnyslope neighborhood, sweat beading on my skin in the late afternoon heat. “Freddie do that to you?”

“What do you want?” Her fat lip and broken nose made it sound more like, “Wuh you wuhn?” She glared at me from her open doorway, resting a hand on her hip.

“You’re Vanessa Nealey, right?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Gee, I figured the words BAIL ENFORCEMENT AGENT printed in big yellow letters on my Kevlar vest would’ve given it away.” I handed her my business card with a sardonic grin. “Jinx Ballou, friendly neighborhood bounty hunter. Your boyfriend, Freddie Colton, missed his court date. Big Bobby Mills at Liberty Bail Bonds hired me to pick him up. Is he here?”

Vanessa crumpled the business card and tossed it at my feet. “Go to hell, lady.” She started to shut the door, but I caught it with the toe of my boot.

“Listen up, princess! You put your home up as collateral. If Prince Charming doesn’t come along with me, your bond is forfeit. Know what that means? It means no happily ever after. Liberty Bail Bonds will take your house, and you’ll be on the street. Is Freddie really worth all that?”

She held my gaze for several seconds before her expression softened. “He ain’t here.”

“You sure about that?”

Vanessa stepped aside. “You wanna look around? Be my guest.”

I was tempted to take her up on her offer, just in case she was bluffing. Technically, I didn’t need her permission or even a warrant. By law, people on bail were still considered to be in custody. One of several reasons I quit the Phoenix PD years ago to be a bounty hunter. Too many regs. Too much paperwork.

My gut told me Vanessa was telling the truth. Freddie’s Trans Am wasn’t in the carport, and I didn’t get the impression she was ready to lose her home just yet.

“Where is he?”

“Out drinking, prob’ly.”

I rolled my eyes. I swear, sometimes this was like pulling teeth. “Out drinking *where?*”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. We done here?”

I considered pressing her, but the sun was turning the back of my neck into bacon. I retrieved my crumpled business card and planted it back in her hand. “Might want to hold onto this. If Freddie shows back up, you’ll want to call me. Unless you’d prefer living on the street when it’s a hundred and ten out.”

I turned to go, then pivoted to face her again. “Tell me something. Why do you put up with his bullshit? How many times has he been arrested for beating you up? Six, seven times at least, according to his sheet. And yet you keep posting his bail, dropping the charges, and letting him back in to do it all over again. I just don’t get it.”

“Freddie loves me.” She raised her chin with royal indignation.

“Geez, you really believe that, don’t you?”

“We done here?”

“Do yourself a favor, Vanessa. Toss his crap onto the sidewalk, change the locks, and don’t bail him out again. He isn’t worth it.”

“Mind your own damn business, lady.” She shoved me away and slammed the door.

I wiped the sweat from my face and pulled my walkie talkie from my tactical belt. “Okay, guys! Let’s pack it up. Girlfriend says he ain’t here.”

“Bullshit!” came a gravelly reply from my associate, Fiddler. “When’ve you ever taken the word of a skip’s girlfriend, Jinx?”

“Not usually, but this time I think she’s telling the truth. Car’s gone. Looks like he beat the ever-lovin’ shit out of her—again—and went out drinking.”

Fiddler, whose real name was Robert Dixon, was a bounty hunter from way back and was considered a legend in the business. Medical issues had forced him to give up leading his own team. But he could still guard a back door, and his prowess as a fugitive hunter was an invaluable resource. At least when I listened to him.

“I bet money he’s in there hiding like the little piss ant he is.” Fiddler shuffled around from the backyard, his beer gut bouncing with each stride. Gray hair hung like ragged curtains from his jawline and down the back of his denim shirt.

Nathaniel “Rodeo” Kwan, an army veteran I’d been training for the past few months, approached from the east side of the house. He was a slim guy, a few years younger than me, sporting a straw Stetson on his head with a shotgun loaded with beanbag rounds slung over his shoulder. “If he ain’t in there, where’s he at?”

“Not sure.” I led them back to my seven-year-old, silver Nissan Pathfinder. Nicknamed the Gray Ghost, it featured an extensive collection of dents, scrapes, missing trim, and peeling paint that rendered it invisible when I was looking for defendants on bail who missed their court dates.

I hopped into the front seat and started the engine. The blast of hot air from the vents made me wince. Rodeo claimed the seat next to me. Fiddler slid into the back.

Flipping through Freddie’s paperwork didn’t yield any clues as to his usual hangouts. I pulled out my phone and checked his social media accounts.

“Ha! You can run, but you’re too stupid to hide.” I held out the phone to Rodeo, showing a status posted twenty minutes earlier. “He’s at some place called One-Eyed Jack's. Dunlap and Nineteenth. I love dumb criminals, don’t you?”

“One-Eyed Jack's?” Fiddler harrumphed. “Jesus! That place is a bucket of blood.”

“It’s that bad, huh?” I asked.

“Bad?” Fiddler laughed darkly. “Used to be called Jack’s Saloon till the owner lost an eye in a bar fight. Friend of mine took a knife in the belly there for ogling some dude’s girl.”

“Friend of yours, huh?” I shook my head as I navigated out of the neighborhood and turned north on Seventh Avenue toward Dunlap. “You hang out with some choice people, Fiddler.”

“All turned out for the best, though,” he continued. “After my friend got outta the hospital, he never cheated on his old lady again.”

Rough bars didn't scare me. Okay, maybe a little. But after my high school boyfriend's father beat me half to death on our graduation night, I'd made it my mission to learn how to handle myself. I'd trained for years in Krav Maga and aikido. I also practiced parkour to help me escape situations that got out of control.

In my eight years as a bounty hunter, I'd been in countless fights, often with guys much bigger than I am. I'd been stabbed a few times. Caught bird shot in the shoulder once. A moon-shaped scar on my lower back marked where a .44 magnum slug had clipped the edge of my Kevlar vest. Typical hazards of the trade.

Nevertheless, as team leader, it was on me to determine how to take Freddie the abusive asshole into custody, ideally without starting a brawl with a bar full of his drinking buddies.

A plan formed as I waited for the light on Dunlap and Fifteenth Avenue to turn green. I'd tried it a few times before with mixed success, but it beat any alternatives I could come up with.

“Okay, kiddos, we're going with a honey trap,” I announced.

“Aw, shit!” said Rodeo and Fiddler in unison.