

A BROKEN WOMAN

A Jinx Ballou Novel

Dharma Kelleher

Chapter 1

The metal railing on the concrete staircase groaned when I fell against it. A bottle of Cuervo Gold dangled precariously from my unsteady hand. I shivered while a shrill chorus of coyotes pierced the cool night air. One cried out the plaintive melody. The others harmonized, raising it to a crescendo, fading to silence for a heartbeat before the cycle started again.

A lot of people hated coyotes, but their cries resonated deep in my soul. Hunter. Trickster. Solitary and yet still reaching out to connect with others of their kind. I'd been solitary too long. I needed some connection.

I pulled my body up two flights, stumbled along the walk to room 319, and pounded on the door. "Willie, man. Let me in."

"Who the hell is it?"

"Liz. Liz Windsor." Not my real name, but he'd find that out soon enough.

"Never hearda you."

"Frank sent me. Thought we could party a little."

I was trying to keep my mind on my business, but part of me just wanted to play the role of the drunken whore for a night. Drinking on the job, especially on an empty stomach, was never a good idea, but what the hell. I was a solitary hunter, but I needed to connect. Lately, the nights had been awful lonely.

The door breezed open so fast I almost fell into the room.

"Whoa," I said with a laugh, steadying myself with the doorframe.

The bare-chested man before me looked worse than his mug shot. Three days' worth of beard growth extended halfway down his throat. He smelled of sweat, musk, and weed. A few weeks on the lam will do that to a person.

His name was Wilhelm Penzler. He'd been charged with money laundering and fraud.

When he failed to appear at his court hearing, his bail bond agent hired me to pick him up and take his stinky ass back to jail.

“Hey, Willie!” I held up the bottle of tequila and shot Penzler my most seductive smile. “Ya wanna party?”

“It’s Wilhelm.” His gaze slid down to where my tube top barely covered my breasts. He grabbed the bottle and took a long pull. “Come on in.”

I should’ve cuffed him right then. But I’d been in a funk for the past week. Okay, more like the past few months. Hadn’t been laid in forever. I deserved a little fun.

A porno played on the television. Open boxes of Chinese takeout sat on the nightstand next to green glass pipe and a mirror dusted with a white powder. Clothes were strewn across a wood-framed chair, the bed, and the floor. A small trash can by the dresser overflowed with fast-food bags and an empty Entenmann’s pastry box.

“Nice place,” I said playfully.

“The maid hates me. So Frankie sent ya, huh? Gotta say, you’re better lookin’ than most of the skanks he has in his stable. How’d he know where I was, anyway?”

I shrugged. “Didn’t say.”

Penzler came up behind me and grabbed my crotch. Under normal circumstances, I would’ve given him a nose job with my elbow and twisted his wrist until the bones popped.

Instead, I moaned with feigned pleasure. Well, somewhat feigned. It felt damn good to be touched. Penzler’s hands migrated up to my breasts, squeezing and massaging. *Oh, Conor*, I almost said out loud, remembering my ex-fiancé.

I sat on Penzler’s bed, eyeing the glass pipe that lay next to a box of Mongolian beef. “You smoking a bowl?”

“Yeah. Wanna hit?”

“Definitely.”

He handed me a lighter, and I indulged myself a little further. The smoke burned my throat, but it helped silence the voice in my head asking me what the hell I thought I was doing. *Yeah, I got a fucking job to do. So what?*

“Shit.” I lay back on the bed, releasing a billowy cloud of sweet white magic. My brain felt like an old barnstorming biplane doing loop-de-loops. I passed the pipe and lighter back to Penzler.

He lay next to me and took a hit. “I know, right? Good shit.”

My phone pinged. “Dammit.”

I glanced at it. A text from Assurity Bail Bonds’ Sadie Levinson read, *You find Penzler yet?*

“Fuck.”

“What’s wrong?” Penzler asked.

“My asshole boss.”

“Frankie?”

“Not exactly.” I took the pipe and lighter from him and set them on the nightstand.

“Whaddya mean, ‘not exactly’? You’re one of his girls, right?” He slipped a leg over mine

and started massaging my breast.

I rolled my eyes. I wanted to just lie there and let Penzler fuck me. Instead, I sat up and twirled my finger in the air. "Turn around."

"Why?"

"Just do it," I insisted.

He guffawed but obeyed. "You ain't gonna do nothing kinky, are you?"

"Not kinky."

I took a deep breath to clear my head. Didn't help. I pulled the handcuffs out of my back pocket and snapped them onto his wrists.

"What the fuck?" he yelled.

"Wilhelm Penzler, you missed your court date and violated your bail agreement." I'd repeated these words so many times that, even high as a kite, I could repeat them without missing a syllable. "I've been hired to return you to custody."

"Bitch, take these off me, or I'll fucking kill you. You know who I work for?" He began to buck. I tried to pull him off the bed, but in my impaired state, I lost my balance. I fell on my ass, banging my head on the nightstand.

"Fuck that hurt."

A loud thud shook the room. I pulled myself up enough to see Penzler slam the door with his shoulder a second time. The doorjamb cracked.

"Dude, chill." I rubbed the goose egg forming on the side of my head.

He charged again. The door smashed open. I heard a metallic clang and a yelp of fear followed by a sickening thud.

My head cleared with a rush of adrenaline. "Awww...shit!"

I rushed out the door after him and stopped at the metal railing. Penzler lay in a heap on the pavement two stories below. "Shit, shit, shit, shit!"

I raced along the walkway, vaulted down the staircase with moves that'd make Jackie Chan jealous, and rushed over to Penzler's body. In the dim overhead light, I could make out a dark liquid puddling around his head. "Goddamn motherfucker shit."

My official title is bail enforcement agent, but that's just a fancy term for a bounty hunter. Unfortunately, the days of "Bring 'em back dead or alive" were long gone. I don't get paid when my fugitive is in the morgue.

I can just walk away. Or call 911 from the burner phone in the glove box of my car. Then when I've sobered up, I can tell Sadie I found Penzler dead in the parking lot, with no idea how he got that way. Yeah, that might work.

"Hey!" A woman in a flowery dress and flip-flops ran toward me with an ice bucket in her hand. "What happened?"

Fuckity fuck fuck fuck!

"Not sure." My heart thudded in my chest. "He...he pitched himself over the rail."

"He dead?" She pulled out her phone, no doubt dialing 911.

"I think so." I was so fucked.

While Ice Bucket Lady called emergency services, I raced back to Penzler's room and tried to figure out what to tell the cops. Between the booze, the weed, and the adrenaline, my mind was having trouble focusing.

Okay, I was never here. Wait, my handcuffs are still on his wrists. Shit. Even if I remove them without anyone seeing, the autopsy will show his wrists were bound. See, I may be drunk and half-baked, but at least I remember shit like that.

Okay, so I was here, and I...I knocked on the door, and he ran out of the room and pitched over the rail. No, that doesn't make sense. Why would he do that?

How about, he opened the door. When I told him who I was, he ran back inside. I chased after him and cuffed him. But he knocked me off balance and busted through the door to escape, only he pitched over the railing instead. Okay, we'll go with that. Wait, who is this we? Shit, I'm so fucked up.

With a ratty towel from the bathroom, I wiped down the tequila bottle, the pipe, and every surface I thought I'd touched. Didn't want anybody to know I was high when I showed up to arrest Penzler. Finally, I called my attorney, Kirsten Pasternak. The phone rang four times before she picked up.

"Jinx? What's up?"

My teeth chattered from a combination of nervousness and the cold. "I'm...in a bit of a situation."

"Can it wait? I'm at the movies with this really charming man. I think he likes me."

I didn't say anything. I just felt stupid for letting something like this happen.

She sighed on her end of the line. "Okay, where are you?"

I gave her the details. She promised she'd be there as soon as she could. "Don't say anything to anyone until I get there."

"I know the drill."