

## Chapter One

“Breakfast is ready!” Sela called to her grandfather as she set the food on the table. As the aroma of fried bacon filled the kitchen, she smiled, knowing her grandfather would love the scent.

Thankfully, the last propane tank had enough fuel to fix one more meal before it sputtered out although, they’d have to suck it up and eat their eggs soft boiled. After breakfast, she’d load the tanks in the back of the truck and take them to town.

She set a cup of black coffee in front of her grandfather’s plate and then set another doctored with cream and sugar next to hers. She loved coffee. She loved the smell and the taste, as long as she could add cream and sugar. In her opinion, drinking it black was just plain nasty.

“Are you coming to eat, or should I feed it to the pigs?” She glanced up at the sound of his slippers shuffling against the floor. His wrinkled face broke into a grin when he spotted the bacon on the table.

“I *knew* I smelled bacon.” He inhaled deeply, a big smile splitting his creased face. “You’re spoiling me, girlie.” Pulling out his chair, he sat and surveyed the feast before him. “Doc Schrader is going to have a fit when I tell him you fixed me bacon, eggs, and pancakes again. Whooeee.” Smacking his lips, he rubbed his hands together.

“Don’t get too excited.” Sela shook her head. “I was boiling the eggs when I noticed the gas tanks were almost empty. I figured you’d rather me squander what was left on the bacon before it went sour.

“You figured right.” He picked up a chewy slice and popped it in his mouth. “Mmm... Nothing like the taste of good, hickory-smoked bacon.” He smacked his lips again before digging into the rest of his breakfast. “You sure are a mighty fine cook.” He took a sip of his coffee and closed his eyes. “And you don’t make me drink that decaffeinated stuff, neither.”

“Half and half, Gramps. It’s half and half.” She chuckled at his scowl. “I told you we’d compromise. We both get half and half, and you watch your sugar and salt intake.”

“Can’t be watching no sugar intake while I’m eating pancakes.” He grinned. “But you won’t hear me complain. No siree.”

Sela smiled at the blatant lie. She’d heard him complain plenty of times. However, she’d never once heard him complain about bacon and eggs for breakfast, especially if it came with a side of pancakes.

“Yes, you can. I’ve mixed the pancake syrup with that sugar-free stuff you hate so much. Half and half. I figured it’s only fair, if you have to eat it, so do I.”

“I *know* I told you that stuff gives me the backdoor trots.” He stared suspiciously at the syrup through narrowed eyes.

“Then, it’s a good thing you’re not staying in the cabin and don’t have to run out the back door to get to the toilet anymore.” She raised a brow. “And don’t go trying to sneak the good stuff, either. There *is* no good stuff. It’s all mixed together, so watch how much of it you eat if you don’t want it affecting your bowels.”

“You’ve got a lot of sass for a little girl, missy.”

“And you’ve got a lot of nerve complaining about sugar-free syrup for a man whose doctor told him to lay off the sugar and salt.” She eyed his plate. “You know, I could just

scrape that in the trough and give you that high-fiber cereal you love so much.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” He wrapped his arm around his plate as though to protect it.

“I would, and you know it.” Sela buttered her pancakes before adding a small amount of the syrup mixture to the top of her small stack. She hated having to use the mixture almost as much as her grandfather did.

The last thing she needed was a case of what her grandfather loved calling the backdoor trots when she needed to drive into town and get their tanks filled. If everything went the way it did the last time, she’d be lucky to get the propane. She couldn’t risk having to use someone’s bathroom. They’d likely all be out of order for her.

If she didn’t know better, she would have thought it had something to do with the color of her skin. However, the people of Whitson had treated her father the same way, and he’d been Caucasian.

Like Gramps always said, *most times the color of your skin has nothing to do with it, sweetheart. Most people are good, kind, honest folks. And, well, to be blunt, assholes are assholes.*

So far, she reckoned he’d been spot on with that assessment. Though most people in town were civil, they *did* give her a hard time sometimes, especially when she needed something farm related, like propane or equipment repair.

Sela glanced out the window at the tired pickup her father had left her with the house and the bank account. He’d left her everything he owned. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to eke out a living if she worked hard. Like her father and his father before him, she had never been afraid of a little hard work.

Her only concern was the possibility of having to drive all the way to Hot Springs. The people in Whitson, Arkansas supported their benefactor, Cal Johnson.

Cal wanted them off the property her father had left her, and like him, Sela was determined to stay.

“Do you think you’ll be okay if I go to town? There’s macaroni salad and bologna in the fridge for lunch.”

“I’ll be fine.” Gramps waved his hand. “I’m worried about you driving around that town with all those yahoos trying to get into your pants.”

“No one’s trying to get into my pants, Grandpa.” She rested her hands on her hips and shook her head.

“They all want to get into your pants. They’re men. Most men don’t have a lick of honor. Especially those who associate with that ass, Johnson.”

“I hope you’re wrong, Gramps.” Sela finished her breakfast, rinsed her dishes in the sink, and set them in the dishwasher. “I’ll be going now.” Turning, she gave him a mock scowl. “Take care of yourself and don’t eat more than two cups of macaroni salad. If you do, I’ll know, and you won’t get any potatoes with dinner.”

“You sound more like my mother than my granddaughter.” He smiled and held out his arms. “Now give an old man a hug before you go.”

Never one to turn down a hug, Sela hurried over and threw her arms around his neck. “I love you, Gramps.” She kissed him on the cheek and straightened. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

God, she hated leaving him alone. It was too easy to lose someone. Her grandfather was the only family she had left, and she knew how precious and fragile human life could be. Almost everyone she had ever loved had died and left her alone, except for one eccentric old man who was just as sad and lonely as she had become.

They needed propane, and it certainly wasn't just going to show up on the doorstep. Cal Johnson brought the end of the farm's propane delivery when she'd still been a teenager, and her grandfather had been hale and hearty. These days, the fuel was difficult to get, and Gramps was pale and nearly as weak as she had been when her father had passed when she was seven.

Sela quickly checked the straps holding the tanks in place in the bed then climbed into the huge, crew cab, 4x4 long box pickup, and headed into town. She'd get her tanks refilled one way or another. She had no choice.

## Chapter Two

Ceno mashed on the accelerator, weaving in and out of the thick traffic like the racecar drivers on the sports channel he watched the night before. He grinned as he maneuvered the vehicle in and out of the lanes, passing everything on the road from tractor trailers to motorcycles.

The expression on the face of the youth riding the crotch rocket motorcycle had made him laugh. The kid hadn't expected a car to pass him. Especially a car like the one *he* drove. There was no way for the young man to have known he and his brother Reno had outfitted the vehicle with an ion propulsion unit.

Their power sources weren't available to the general public. Hell, they weren't available to anyone outside of Magic, New Mexico, where he and his brothers had set up shop after their spacecraft crashed just outside the small town's city limits.

Had the people of Magic not rushed to their rescue and pulled them out of the flaming crash, Ceno and three of his brothers would have perished. They owed the residents of Magic their very lives.

Zippering past another SUV, he noticed an exit, slowed down, and popped into the right lane. Taking the exit, he let up off the accelerator and brought the car down to a crawl. Braking at the stop sign, he turned into the nearest service station. He needed gas to run the air conditioner, and he was thirsty. An ice-cold bottle of water and a hot dog sounded good.

"I don't care what Johnson told you. I need my tanks filled. I have them in the back of my truck. Just fill the damned things."

Ceno glanced up from the cooler, where he'd been about to grab a bottle of water, to see a gorgeous woman standing at the counter. A bright yellow shirt contrasted beautifully with the dark color of her smooth, mocha skin. Thick black hair fell down her back in soft waves, falling just shy of hips wide enough to make his mouth water. She was tall, too—at least five foot ten by his new country's measurements.

She turned a bit, and Ceno managed a good look at her profile. Full breasts jutted from her chest, and her slightly rounded belly melded into wide hips he could imagine holding onto while he drove into her soft flesh. Her bottom lip stuck out in an annoyed pout as she glared at the man behind the counter.

"Uh, uh. Sela. You know I can't do that. Cal Johnson would have my ass if he found out I was helping you and your grandpa." The clerk behind the counter leaned down and gave her a leer. "I might think about it if you were to give me a ride in the back of your truck if you know what I mean." He waggled his brows.

Ceno didn't know what he'd expected, but he surely hadn't expected the woman to scream with frustration and punch the man in the mouth.

"Seeing as your mama can't see clear to washing that mouth out with soap, maybe I should put it out of commission." She growled at the guy, spun on her heels and ran smack dab into Ceno.

"Excuse me, ma'am." Ceno drawled in the southwestern accent he'd practiced before leaving Magic. "Can I be of some assistance?" Gods, he hoped so. She was beautiful and smelled like dessert and heaven all rolled into one.

"Not unless you can get my propane tanks filled," she said as she stepped back and

looked up at him. "I'm sorry for being snarky. It's not your fault his boss is an ass." She gestured to the guy behind the counter. "I hope I didn't hurt you when I ran into you."

Ceno met her tear-filled gaze and felt his heart melt. Something strange seemed to stretch within him, and he frowned. Had he just felt his beast stir? He stared at the beautiful woman and knew if anyone could awaken his other half, it would be the gorgeous woman standing before him.

"I might be able to get your tanks filled." He glanced at the clerk who had just finished with another customer. "How much to fill her tanks?"

"I already told her, Cal Johnson will have my ass in a sling if I fill her tanks. He don't want no one around here helping out this here *woman*." The clerk, whose nametag identified the man as JC waved his arm with a scowl. "Now get up on outta here, the both of ya, before I call the cops."

"You," Ceno growled as he leaned forward and grasped JC by the front of his grease-stained t-shirt, "will fill her tanks, or I'll tear you limb from limb. Now, how much will it cost?"

"W-what size are your tanks, Sela?" JC gave her a sideways glance.

"That's Miss Williams to you, JC," Sela answered, her chin high. "And I have three one-hundred-pound tanks in the back of my truck."

"Three?" JC's eyes widened, and he whined. "Three will give you enough gas to last almost another year with that wood stove you have."

"It sure will." She smiled. "I don't know why Johnson wants us off our land so badly, but you can tell the jerk that I'll drive clear into Hot Springs for gas next time if I have to. He's not stopping me and my grandpa from staying on our land."

JC shook his head. "If you only knew, lady."

"Knew what?" She narrowed her eyes and glared at the man. "What don't we know?"

"Tell her," Ceno twisted the front of the shirt, tightening the opening around JC's throat. "Tell her what she doesn't know about her land."

"Well..." Sweat ran down JC's face, and the acrid smell of ammonia reached Ceno's nose, making him grimace. "The surveys say there's the possibility of a rich gold deposit somewhere on their land, and Cal wants it."

"Tell *Cal*, it's too damned bad," Ceno growled as he flicked a gaze toward Sela, who stood wide-eyed and speechless just to his right. "Tell your boss that Miss Williams and her grandfather have protection, and anyone who wants to try to drive them from their land will have to deal with me."

Gently, he lowered the other man to the floor when he wanted nothing more than to tear him limb from limb for treating a female with such disrespect.

"You don't know Johnson." The other man trembled as Ceno held him in place. "He'll kill you all before he'll give up the possibility of a rich gold strike."

"He's welcome to try." Ceno bared his teeth. "In fact, I hope he does try. If he does, he'll soon find out I won't die easily."

In fact, he and his brothers would be nearly impossible to exterminate by Earth methods. The four of them weren't human. Any attempt on their lives would only piss them off and bring the wrath of their Earth-bound family down on anyone stupid enough to try it.

Being an alien had its advantages. For one thing, anyone attempting to murder them would assume they were human, and in doing so, would make a lethal mistake. Their organs weren't the same as humans, and they had redundancies to keep them alive

while major organs repaired themselves.

“What are you doing?” Sela hissed next to him. “Don’t challenge the man; he’s liable to take you up on the offer.”

“As I said, he’s welcome to try.” Every protective instinct he hadn’t realized he possessed had risen up. His other half struggled to free itself as the need to protect Sela blossomed within him.

“You don’t understand.” She stared up at him, her beautiful green-brown eyes shining with unshed tears. “I-I think he had my father and my mom’s parents killed. Had I not been staying with my other grandfather in Texas for the summer, he probably would have had *me* killed as well. I don’t know if I could stand someone else dying for the ranch.” She bit her lip. “Maybe it’s time I sell out and cut my losses.”

Ceno turned his attention back to JC. He bared his teeth in a silent snarl. “Go change your pants. You’ve urinated on yourself.”

JC didn’t need to be told twice. He scrambled away, putting as much distance between them as he could.

“You people are crazy. Do ya hear me? Crazy!” He ducked into the back room to call Cal Johnson and his hired thugs, no doubt.

“Come on,” Ceno said as he reached across the counter and set the propane to pump. That was one good thing about running Magic’s largest service station with his brothers. He knew how to fill propane tanks in his sleep.

They’d deal with paying that asshole JC after they filled her tanks.

“Pull your truck around to the propane station, and I’ll fill you up myself.”

“You know how to do that,” she asked as she backed out the door.

“Sure do. My brothers and I run a gas station together. Filling a propane tank is almost a daily occurrence in Magic when tourists are camping nearby.”

Magic’s population relied on alternate fuel sources. Solar, wind, wood, ion propulsion, or just plain magic. They tried to live as close to nature as they could, leaving as little of a carbon footprint as possible.

It was a great idea. It promoted better air quality in town. While other communities of similar size had a degree of pollution, Magic had almost none.

“I don’t know how to thank you for doing this for me.”

“We’ll talk about that after we get the fuel you need.” He smiled, hoping he looked more handsome than vicious as he did so.

Her face darkened with a blush, and his cock hardened. The scent of her arousal filled the air, and it was all he could do not to push her against the side of the vehicle and press his nose to some parts delicate enough to make her punch him harder than she had the cashier inside.

He inhaled, dragging her unique aroma deep into his lungs, reveling in her sweet scent. Not once had he ever been able to smell a woman’s arousal. It was yet another sign that the female standing before him was meant to be his and his alone.

Gladly following the seductive sway of her generous hips with his gaze, he watched as she sauntered around the truck and dropped the tailgate before climbing into the large vehicle, and backing it up to the huge gas pig.

He eyed the large tank and grinned. They all looked similar with their fat bodies and stubby legs. It wasn’t hard to figure out why those in the business called them pigs.

After parking the truck, she shut off the engine and slid from the driver’s seat and walked around to the back of the eight-foot bed.

“Why does this Johnson asshole get away with bullying people?” Ceno asked as he hopped into the bed. He figured he knew the answer, but he wanted to strike up a conversation that would get his mind off rutting against her like some mindless animal. He needed to learn as much as he could about the woman he intended to make his mate.

Everything their father had told him about meeting his mate had come true in less than a minute while he managed to help her out of a predicament. Now, he wanted to spend some time getting to know her.

“It’s because he owns pretty much everything in the area. Most everyone is afraid of him.”

His heart thumped loudly in his chest. His gums and bones ached with the need to shift his shape into his other self, and his cock wouldn’t obey even the sternest of his commands to behave.

Sela was everything he ever wanted in a woman. Her full figure and the scent of her arousal made his mouth water. Ceno wanted nothing more than to pull the gorgeous female into his arms and press his hungry mouth against hers.

In the several years they’d been on Earth, he’d never once met a woman who sent his body into overdrive the way Sela managed to do with just an innocent smile and the sway of her generous curves. He wasn’t certain what attracted him the most—her beautiful face, her tempting figure, or the fact that she could hold her own when insulted. Watching her punch JC had been one of the single most sexy things he’d ever witnessed.

Like most predators, his beast didn’t want a weak female. It wanted a female who would protect their children and hold her own in a fight. Sela had proven she could do just that. Though she managed to punch JC in the mouth, the situation had still brought out his protective instincts.

Every fiber of his being needed to stand up to JC, grab him by the throat, and shake him until every breath left his body. Yet Ceno knew he couldn’t do that. It was a fast track to jail on this world, and he had the feeling that Sela would never forgive him for taking a human life.

He pressed his lips together and barely managed to hold back the low growl he felt rising in his throat. Just the thought of the other man’s greasy hands on her was enough to make him want to tear the man to pieces.

Topping off the first tank, he moved to the second and then the third as he watched her. Her gaze darted everywhere except toward him.

Ceno wasn’t sure what it was about her that attracted him the most. Was it her independence or her beauty? Could it be her ability to stand up to a man and punch him in the mouth or the fact that she could blush so easily? Perhaps it was the fact that her lush body was sexy enough to tempt even the most devout clergy. Whatever it was, he found himself wanting to spend more time with her.

“There you go,” he said as he hopped down. “Pull around to the front of the building so we can pay the man. The last thing we need is for him to call the police and say we’re stealing the fuel from him.”

“Yes.” She nodded, her full lips pursed into a perfect bow. “We don’t need him telling people *that*.”

Opening the driver’s door, Ceno helped her into her truck. “I’ll meet you around front, and we’ll take care of the bill, even if JC doesn’t want to take your money.”

“I really don’t know how to thank you.” Reaching up, she tucked a stray lock of hair

behind her ear. “I didn’t really want to have to drive all the way to Hot Springs for propane, but I would have.”

“Well...” Ceno glanced toward the ground, wondering if she would accept his offer or tell him to go pack sand. “You could invite me to dinner, and I could offer to rent a portion of your property for a while.”

“I don’t—”

“Don’t answer me now.” He held up his hand. “Let’s just go take care of the gas bill, and we’ll discuss it over a cup of coffee.” He glanced around. “There is a diner around here somewhere, isn’t there?”

“Of course.” She shook her head. “Though, I’m not sure if any of them will serve me. Cal Johnson really has his hooks into almost everyone around here. Somehow, he makes it so they need money and can only borrow from him, and then, before you know it, he’s foreclosed on the property, and the previous owner then works for him. He’s a pretty powerful guy. You might regret helping me.”

“Never.” Ceno shook his head. “If you can’t believe anything else I tell you, you can surely believe I will *never* regret helping you today. As a matter of fact...” He paused, giving her another of his practiced smiles. “I believe today is my lucky day!”

### Chapter Three

Sela stared up and up at the man she could hardly believe had come to her rescue. Tall and lean, he could have just stepped off the page of a magazine. His blond hair was so light, it was almost platinum and contrasted with his golden tan. His eyes were such a light blue, the irises almost appeared white or clear.

Perfect white blond brows slashed over his incredible eyes. While his mouth had an almost cruel-looking quality when dealing with JC, but when he smiled at her...

*Good lord!* She fought the urge to fan herself. She didn't know what it was, but something about him sure made her hot. His deep baritone made her insides melt while his forceful attitude with JC had made her knees weak, which was something she didn't understand at all.

She'd never really gone for the alpha-male type before. It seemed as though every one of her friends back East who had fallen for an alpha male had ended up abused. Yet, for some reason, she couldn't see the man who had filled her propane tanks getting all rowdy with a woman unless it was in the bedroom.

Try as she might, she just couldn't stop staring at the tall stranger while he filled her propane tanks. He'd hopped up into the back of her truck as though he'd been doing it all his life. His hands and body showed the proof of labor. Whether it was in a gym or at a job, he worked hard, and it showed.

Broad shoulders tapered down to a muscular chest and a waist thick with muscle. Thighs, the size of small tree trunks, stretched his jeans tight, and the telltale bulge behind his zipper almost made her blush.

Sela barely held back a snort. He might be a nice guy, and he might get off on helping out women in distress, but the one flaw she could see was the fact that he obviously stuffed his pants almost as much as a flat-chested teenaged girl stuffed her bra. No one could be *that* big downstairs. It just wasn't possible, was it?

Nothing could have shocked her more than when he opened the driver's door for her. He actually trusted her to drive around to the front and not stick him with the gas bill. Was he trusting or gullible?

"I'll meet you inside then." He closed the door after she settled herself in the seat.

"Sure." She smiled and reached for the keys. "I'll see you inside."

As much as he scared her into wanting to drive off before he could follow her home, she drove around to the front of the building and shut down the engine.

"Face it, you idiot, you're going to let him talk you into taking him home for dinner. Gramps is going to have a heyday with this. He's going to give you the lecture of a lifetime." Sighing, she pulled the keys from the ignition, opened her door, and turned to slide out of the driver's seat.

"Here, let me help."

Strong hands grasped her around the waist, while even stronger arms lifted her from the seat and set her gently on the ground as though she weighed nothing or next to it.

*Too bad he didn't need to hold me close and let me slide down his hard length, like in all those romances I read.* Sela hoped her disappointment didn't show.

Hell, just the thought of that made her shiver. What was it about him that had her imagining all sorts of hot things going on once they got back to her place? She could put him up in the bunkhouse and then go visit him after Gramps went to bed.

She rested a hand over her belly, hoping to still the fluttering in her middle, which felt like a thousand butterflies flitting around inside her stomach.

“Shall we go pay your bill?” He held out his arm as though leading her onto a dance floor.

“Why, kind sir,” Sela said in her best southern belle accent, her eyes wide, a hand over her heart, “I’m not sure I should accompany you anywhere. I don’t even know your name.”

“Ceno Brewer, at your service, my lady,” he replied in kind. Removing his cowboy hat, he bowed deeply before straightening to his full height, giving her a sexy smile and a wink as he held out his hand.

“Sela Williams.” She rested her hand in his much larger one. How gentle he was when he took her hand in his wasn’t lost on her. She might not be the greatest judge of character, but she believed he was a true gentleman and she could trust taking him home to meet her grandfather.

What was the worst that could happen? She was wrong, and he was an ax murderer? Seriously, what difference would it make? If Ceno didn’t kill them, Cal Johnson would eventually succeed. At least by taking a chance, she was finally living a little. And if a miracle happened and she had finally found her match, she would have help holding her ranch together—or not.

Who knew what could happen? Didn’t he say he and his brothers owned a service station somewhere? Maybe they could all move there and put the prejudices and good-ole-boy system of this backwater town behind them. Bigots shouldn’t even exist anymore. It was twenty-seventeen, for goodness sake.

“I really don’t know how to thank you for your help,” she said as he led her into the convenience store.

“You could invite me home for dinner.”

*I knew it.* Could she call it or what?

“I don’t really know you, and you expect me to invite you to my home?”

“We’ll meet somewhere for dinner, then. I’m not picky.”

*What the hell. Why not?*

“I don’t believe I’m saying this, but why don’t you join my grandfather and me for supper?”

There was just something about his open smile. It was as though the entire universe was telling her he was as trustworthy as the old man sitting back on the farm anxiously awaiting her return.

“I would love to, ma’am.” His teeth gleamed white, making her heart pound in her chest. Was it attraction she felt or something more primal—like fear? “I’m trustworthy. I promise. It’s my brother Deno you’d have to worry about raiding your home for valuables. He’s totally uncivilized. You’d think he was brought up by wolves the way he acts sometimes.” He grinned. “Though, I know some wolves who could teach him better manners than what our father managed to pound into his thick skull in the twenty-six years of his miserable life.”

“Does your brother know you bad mouth him like that?” She lifted a brow, wondering about a man who could speak so poorly of his brother behind his back.

“Of course!” He took a step back, his face a mask of surprise. “I say the same things to his face, slack-jawed though it is most of the time.” He grinned, letting her know he was truly fond of his brother, no matter what he said.

“Is he older?” It wouldn’t surprise her. A lot of men liked to talk crap about their older brothers. Then again, she’d heard a few picking on those younger than themselves, as well.

“Nope.” He shook his head as they walked toward the entrance of the store. “That would be Reno. He’s the oldest, I’m second in command; then, the twins take over after that—if you can tell them apart. There are six of us all together, but our two youngest brothers are still with our dad.”

He held the door open for her, and her stomach did another little flip. When was the last time *any* man had held the door for her?

“You sound proud of them.”

“What, me?” He shook his head. “Whatever you do, don’t tell them that. It’ll go to their heads, and I’ll never get another decent day’s work out of them.” He winked again. “Deno’s the youngest of our little group in Magic, and like it or not, he gets a lot of jeering from the rest of us. Besides, most times he deserves it. He once fed us rotten chicken because he thought the mold covering it was its feathers growing back.”

“Okay. Maybe your little brother isn’t the sharpest pencil in the box.” She laughed as they approached the counter.

JC, wearing what appeared to be a pair of women’s bright pink spandex leggings, stood behind the counter.

“Nice pants, JC.” Sela did her best to keep the grin off her face but still failed miserably.

“They belong to Marla.” He scowled. “They’re her workout pants. It was the only pair of dry pants in the store. I had to run mine next door to the laundromat. I... uh... I spilled something on them,” he lied.

“Yeah, right. How much do I owe you for the propane?”

“Oh, it’s on the house.”

“Don’t give me that crap. I’m not leaving here until I pay for it. You’re not calling the cops on me for not paying.” Sela leaned over the counter and read the total. “Ring it up.” She smiled sweetly, giving Ceno a glance. “Or do I have to ask my friend to make you, uh... spill something on your bright pink spandex pants?”

“Six eighty-nine, then.” He glowered at her, his gaze occasionally shifting to Ceno, as though the other man would pounce on him at any moment.

“Ring it up, and I’ll run my card, and yes, I’ll want a receipt.”

“You heard the lady.” Ceno stepped up beside her, resting his big hands on the counter.

“Yes, sir!” JC hurriedly rang up the gas, took her card, and then handed it back to her with the receipt. “You know, Cal isn’t going to like this a bit. It’s only going to get worse for you when your friend gets tired of hanging around and goes home.”

“Maybe, but I’ll sleep well while he’s here, and goodness knows, Cal and his goons have seen to it that I don’t get much rest. The vacation will do wonders for me. By the way...” Sela made a show of looking JC up and down like a piece of meat. “Those pink pants really show off your package.” She frowned a bit. “Though, you might think about putting on a sweater if you’re cold,” she added, glancing pointedly at his crotch.

“Fuck you, Sela!”

JC couldn’t have known what hit him. Ceno moved so fast, she didn’t even see him reach across the counter and grab the other man by the throat, yet again.

“Apologize to the lady, JC.” He actually growled in the other man’s face. “Apologize,

and I might let you live long enough to wash out your co-worker's pants."

"I-I'm sorry, Sela. I didn't mean nothin' by it. I was just mad. You know how it is."

"Yeah. I know how it is." Sela sighed. "Go ahead and put him down, Ceno. He's got enough to worry about. His rear end is going to be in a really tight spot once Johnson finds out he sold me almost a year's worth of propane." She tilted her head and gave JC a tight smile. "You'll be lucky if he doesn't send one of his *negotiators* after you." Shaking her head, she crossed her arms. "Good luck, talking yourself out of the beating of a lifetime."

"Shit." JC whimpered. "You're right. I'll be lucky if he doesn't have me killed."

"Them's the breaks." Ceno dropped him to the floor as though discarding a piece of trash.

"Maybe you should think about leaving town." Ceno threw several one-hundred-dollar bills on the counter. "Go home, pack your shit, and get the hell out of town before Johnson finds out you sold Sela gas."

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir." JC snatched the money up off the counter and ran out through the back door.

"Why did you do that?"

"I'm not sure." Ceno shrugged. "I only know that a man shouldn't have to die because he was too weak to follow the orders of a tyrant."

Sela tried not to think about what type of person carried that kind of cash around with them.

"Is that drug money?" *Crap!* The words were out before she'd even known she was going to say them. "Never mind. It's none of my business. I don't want to know."

"It's not drug money. I'm not a drug dealer. Nor am I a thief. My brothers and I have a very busy shop in Magic. We make quite a bit of money salvaging things, as well. You could say we were born to do it."

"Salvaging?"

"You know, abandoned cars, things that fall from the sky. We've even been known to dabble in finding lost treasure." He winked again.

Was he serious, or was that wink to make her think he wasn't serious when, really, he was?

"You'll find out more about our salvaging skills tomorrow if you'll allow me to show you."

What could he possibly show her? There was nothing on her property worth salvaging.

*What about the gold JC told you about?*

She told her inner voice to shut up. There was no gold on her property. She needed to keep *that* uppermost in her mind.

## Chapter Four

Ceno followed her out of the store and helped her into her truck. It took every ounce of willpower he had not to boost her up into the vehicle with his hand on her lovely ass.

“Are you following me home then?” Was she afraid he wouldn’t or afraid he would?

“Sure.” He glanced back toward the car, which belonged to his sister-in-law. It sat where he left it, looking as innocuous as any other automobile. “I just need to get some gas. You won’t leave without me, will you?”

“No.” She smiled. “No matter how tempted I might be. I owe you, and I pay my debts.”

“Give me a few minutes, and I’ll be ready to go.” Ceno trotted to the car, ran his card in the reader and filled the tank. He’d planned to get something to eat inside. It was why he’d gone into the building in the first place. Now, it just seemed prudent to fuel up the car and follow Sela to her home.

After what happened with JC, there was no doubt in Ceno’s mind Sela and her grandfather were going to need protection. The part of him she’d awakened wouldn’t rest until he made sure she was safe and in his care.

It took about three minutes to fill the tank. Still, it was the longest three minutes of his life. As much as he wanted to protect her, shifting shape in front of her wouldn’t be his first choice. Not yet. Unfortunately, he might not have another option if someone threatened her.

Sliding behind the wheel, he started the car and put it in gear.

“It took you long enough.”

“Yeah, well, there was an altercation in the store,” Ceno answered the unspoken question. He put the car in gear and smiled. “What do you care? You’re just a car. You should be glad that no one slammed into you while I was gone.”

“They wouldn’t dare!”

“Was that outrage,” he asked as he followed Sela out of the gas station and onto the road.

“No. It was indignation. Besides...” the female voice made a sniffing noise. The two men who checked me out seemed rather nice until they tried to open my door. You know, you really shouldn’t leave the keys in the ignition. It invites criminals to try to steal me.”

“Someone tried to steal you?”

“Yes. And they would have if you hadn’t installed that lovely force field.” It chuckled before continuing. “I raised it just in time, too. They tried to break the window.”

“Shit.”

“You should say *merde*.”

“Why? It’s the same thing.” Ceno shook his head while keeping Sela in sight. She turned left onto the highway and shot out into traffic.

“It sounds more civilized.”

“Right,” he said with a snort. “You’re an old clunker. What do you know about it?”

“I know those men wanted to steal me. Right up until I put up my force field and scolded them.”

*What?*

“Please tell me you didn’t talk to them.”

“Of course I did. They were trying to steal me! I didn’t see you anywhere about, ready to defend my honor.”

Ceno almost lost sight of Sela. She was in the right lane and headed down an exit he nearly shot past in his agitation.

“I told you not to talk to people, damn it!”

“And you promised to take care of me. Instead, you were in a convenience store making a date.”

“Oh, my Goddess. Are you... you can’t be. Are you jealous?”

“I’m a car. How could I possibly be jealous of a human woman with such a large posterior?”

“I love her posterior, and don’t you dare make her feel self-conscious about it.” Since when had the car developed an attachment to him?

“See?” She sniffed. “You’re beginning to ignore me already. I’m just a car. I don’t have an ass unless you want to count my trunk. I *do* have lovely trunk space.”

*Oh, my Goddess. Is Birgit’s psycho car coming on to me?*

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