

Heavy Metal Honey

By

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Chapter One

Kimmer Reed peered through her night-vision goggles into a green-hued desert. "Got me some dust," she said into the tiny voice-activated mike at the side of her face. "Ooh, these next gen goggles are *sweet*."

In her ear, ex-CIA operative Rio Carlsen responded, "Got dust here, too."

Rio...she'd met him on an assignment, cemented their relationship on an unofficial op, and only a few weeks earlier he'd accepted the Hunter Agency's offer of part-time work. And here they were on their first assignment together, scanning the Arizona borderlands for one very specific smuggler.

Also sweet.

"Move in?" Rio suggested.

"Move in," she confirmed. They wouldn't spook anyone with their motorbikes, sleek little hydrogen-fueled machines not quite meant for the rugged terrain of the Coronado National Forest. Even here at four thousand feet of elevation, the desert foliage lent itself more to spines and prickles and low-lying brittle brush than actual trees, and the footpaths spit out a powdery dust at the passage of anything on four feet or two wheels.

She and Rio flanked the trail they'd hoped the smuggler would use, with nine hundred meters of combined night vision range between them. More Hunter agents flanked similar trails all along this section of the border — the trails that led to Bisbee, the unofficial drug corridor of the border. And now they had dust.

Kimmer said, "Could be the jackpot." And she grinned — fiercely — because they were headed for action, and because there was nothing better than nabbing a bad guy. Kimmer and her SIG, Rio and the Colt on which he'd recently settled.

Or to be more precise, Kimmer and her SIG and every other little weapon she had stashed in her clothing. She also wore a light pack with camelback water supply, restraints and the heavy lined pouch for the smuggler's contaminated dope — their ultimate goal.

"Might not be *our* jackpot," Rio said. More laid back than she by far, he was astonishing once he went into action. Which, since the blown operation that had been the end of his CIA field career, wasn't as often as it had once been. Even now, he still favored his bad side.

"Might be just your average illegal immigrant," Kimmer agreed. But she didn't think so. The average illegal immigrant didn't have the means to buy a dirt bike, and the dust they saw came from wheels, not feet — this particular runner had been, at least to some extent, financed. Kimmer eased her own bike forward through the brush, glad for her knee and shin guards — she brushed by a prickly pear without taking damage, and then a cholla.

"What I don't get," she murmured to Rio, "is what's so important about this particular smuggler. Let's get serious — pretty much the whole agency is in on this one, not to mention the border patrol and friends."

"Contaminated drugs," Rio said. "Meaner than your average bear if they get out into distribution. They pulled us in because we could mobilize faster."

"We're not immobilized by red tape, you mean." Kimmer looked to the side, discovered him within visual range. "I just wish I'd had a chance to talk to the suits. There are things going unsaid. *Important* things." Not that it mattered. They'd come to get a drug-dealing smuggler, and they would. When it came to the bad guys, Kimmer gave no quarter.

Kimmer *gleefully* gave no quarter.

And Rio laughed, angling along the other side of the trail from her, his wheat-blond hair hidden by his helmet but his large, lanky frame making his sleek motorbike look not quite up to the job. "Why do you think they stayed out of your sights?"

Kimmer grumbled, but she knew he was right. Agency directors tended to avoid her, simply because she had a knack for reading the truth behind a situation. Any situation. Anyone.

Almost anyone except Rio. She'd had to figure him out from the ground up. At first it had scared her...and now she had learned to revel in it. Just as they were learning to reconcile Kimmer's alienation from all things family to his tight-knit, compassionate relatives.

Rio's voice changed, became all business, "Here we go —"

For the dust had drifted away into the dark night, and the trail widened into a flat area littered with the refuse of previous runners — water bottles and suitcases and belongings that these travelers had once thought they couldn't do without. And here, a figure stood by a dirt bike, shapeless under layers of ill-fitting clothing, long stringy hair hanging limp, shoulders slumped with fatigue.

Good. The better to snatch you up.

Kimmer gunned the eerily silent engine and shot forward, balancing as though she rode a living thing, aware of Rio a beat behind her. They circled the figure in an

unmistakable message — *we found you!* — kicking up dust in a ghostly silent display and all the while expecting the smuggler to go for a gun, to jump for the bike.

But none of those things happened, and when Kimmer stopped her bike, she was greeted with exhausted relief. "Finally!" the smuggler said in Spanish, and using a woman's voice to do it. She reached inside her baggy long-sleeved shirt to tug at the hem of the oversized T-shirt beneath. "Take this, and give me my papers!"

Rio sent Kimmer a quick look, as startled as she at what they'd cornered; she lifted one shoulder in a shrug of reply.

"Well?" The woman tucked lank hair behind her ear and mustered up a glare from a young face already careworn. "That's what you said. I bring this over the border. I don't get caught. You give me my papers. So take your drugs! I don't want anything more to do with them!"

Not exactly the gutter-crawling nastiness Kimmer had expected — just a mule, trading honor for the American Dream. She took a second look, a closer look — she saw the fear and exhaustion and the edges of hope. Kimmer almost felt sorry for her.

Almost.

"The problem is," Kimmer said, also in Spanish, "you got caught."

"I —" The young woman looked at Kimmer, looked at Rio. Her hands went to her waist and the fanny bag now visible beneath her clothes. "*Madre de Dios!*"

"You must be kidding," Kimmer told her. "She was a *mom*. Probably a charter member of Mothers Against Drugs."

"But they'll kill me!"

"You don't look so hot now." And it was true. The woman didn't stand quite straight, didn't show any real energy.

Contaminated drugs.

She made her choice.

And then Rio lifted his head in alarm and said, "Kimmer —" and the world exploded into light and gunfire. Kimmer ripped off her goggles and abandoned the bike to hit the dirt. Cholla spines drove through her leather gloves and she blistered the air.

"Rio!"

"I'm good!" he shouted back over the high-pitched engine of the dirt bike kicking in, and the sudden din of several others joining it. Kimmer blinked furiously, pulling her SIG from its low thigh holster but still unable to see. Sporadic shots kicked up dirt in her general direction, and she hugged the ground, exposing herself just enough to see two new bikes crash into the drug mule's bike.

Kimmer realized then that the woman would be killed — she was a liability

now — and she took a shot at the dark round blur of a bike tire, wasted another into the dirt just to make sure she had their attention. Return fire kept her low as Rio followed her example — another moment of sound and blurry darkness and vague movement, and the motorbikes raced away, two in tandem and a belated third gunning off in the opposite direction with Kimmer sprinting up to take a chance at it.

She stumbled over something soft but solid and went down, brushing up against another cholla. "Sonuva —!"

"She got away with it," said Rio — he whom she had tripped over. "I saw that much. Sort of."

Kimmer squinted into the night with futility and little result. "And we got nothing."

And now the contaminated drugs were on their way to the dealer pipeline — and Kimmer had the strong feeling they were about to discover what the stakes had really been.

Chapter Two

The bad-guy drug smugglers got away in the dark desert. The drug mule had also escaped, still carrying her payload.

And here Kimmer sat in a meeting.

She plucked at the prickly pear spines in the tender skin of her inner wrist. Not the big obvious ones, but the almost invisible ones, fine barbed hairs that made their presence more known with each passing moment. Beside her, Rio casually crossed his ankle over his knee, managing to nudge her in the process. A *pay attention* signal.

Fine. This sleek conference room was supposed to impress her. The fact that they'd been helicoptered to Tucson was supposed to impress her.

Thing was, she'd seen what she needed to see. Stripped of her weapons — they thought — and escorted into this government building where a handful of men took their time arriving and then only glanced at Kimmer and Rio, murmuring among themselves until the final participant arrived — Owen Hunter.

And meanwhile she'd already looked the men over — already knew what they had in mind. "We're going to get scolded," she said under her breath to Rio, seeing he'd heard by the tilt of his head and the amusement in his dark, angled eyes. Everything about Rio came angled, a courtesy of his heritage — strong Danish bones beneath sculpted Japanese-stamped features.

He was no more impressed by this gathering of authority figures than she. They'd both rather be out in the field, coordinating with other Hunter agents to track down the missing drugs. They had suspect names; they had favorite distribution channels.

They had places to start.

Though the point had been to get the stuff before it hit distribution at all.

"What about that?" Kimmer asked abruptly, as the suits shuffled their chairs up to the table in the wake of Owen's arrival. "How the heck did that stuff get so contaminated that it brought you all together?"

Owen, who had greeted her with a nod, now cleared his throat — she knew it for the request that it was. *Don't cause trouble.*

Too late. This little gathering was all about chastising them, about imprinting them with the importance of what they had failed to do and shaming them into bursting out upon the world to finish the job.

Kimmer wasn't too keen on being shamed.

She was, however, pretty much into bursting out upon the world and taking down the bad guys.

One of them cleared his throat. A white middle-aged man with a hairstyle that didn't quite acknowledge his advancing baldness. "About that," he said, and then stopped, starting again on a different tack. "I'm Thomas Keen, assistant director of the Homeland Security Terrorist Threat Integration Center. This is Gregor Spellman, deputy commissioner of the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol." This, a stern tea-colored man with silvered hair and a perceptible facelift. The final nod went to a black man who looked annoyed at the whole idea of being here. "And Jaden DuBois, FBI counterterrorism."

Owen Hunter, indisputable authority of the elite family-owned Hunter Agency, didn't offer any title at all. But he did nod at her, and she nodded back. "Kimmer Reed," she said, and glanced down at her leather biking duds. "All-round kick-ass chick. And Rio Carlsen —"

"Her sidekick," Rio said dryly.

Keen's lips thinned briefly. Then he leaned forward to tap the closed file folder on the table in front of him. "I'll get right to the point. We were very disappointed in the results of last night's stakeout."

Tell me about it. Kimmer scratched at the prickly pear spines in her wrist, and said nothing.

"Frankly," Spellman said, tapping the table with some authority, "I need to be convinced that we have the best possible team before we go further." He looked at Kimmer; she smiled back in the most predatory way. So she wasn't all that big; so she had her totally curly dark chestnut hair cut cap-short in a gamin style and guileless eyes he would never be able to read. She was also honed by the best training Hunter could provide after they found her — a runaway caught in the middle of an undercover op — and a dossier of successful assignments. Not to mention that brutal childhood.

Owen cleared his throat. "Don't waste our time by going there, gentlemen. You

may consider us a small private agency, but we've been playing in the big kids' sandbox for a good number of years now. I'll withhold commentary — for now — about the validity of the intel you passed us, and you can assume I'm competent to assess my own agents."

Ooh. They hadn't expected that. They looked as though they'd bitten into a communal lemon. But they were also experienced men, good at their jobs; they dropped the subject with a series of tacit glances among themselves, and then Keen cleared his throat again. "Here's what you need to know. The woman you failed to intercept last night also thought she carried drugs."

Thought? Kimmer quit scratching her wrist; beside her, Rio's foot thumped to the ground.

"What," Owen said with distinct care, "*was* she carrying?" And Kimmer heard his unspoken words, the cold, hard *what did you send my agents into?* demand.

DuBois looked as though he could hardly bring himself to say the words. "The powdered remains of a spent fuel rod from the Lagura Verde plant."

"Whoa," Kimmer said, implications reeling through her. "That stuff is *hot*."

Spellman offered, "As far as we know, the woman had no idea what she carried. She, too, thought it was drugs. She was chosen to smuggle the material so that our main targets could dissociate from her if there was trouble."

"And you thought this would make no difference to us?" Rio's voice seemed only to hold calm query, but Kimmer knew better. Her congenial ex-CIA agent on his first Hunter assignment...and he was about to walk away. The CIA had taught him some hard lessons about trusting the chain of command.

"We sent you with more than adequate container materials," Keen pointed out. No wonder that pouch had been so damned heavy. *Lead-lined*. He eyed her, meant to quell any objections. "You were to intercept the woman and obtain her cargo. It wouldn't have gone down any differently had you known the details."

"Gentlemen, I'm surprised at you." Owen stood. His hard, rugged features were tightly set and he, too, was on the verge of walking out.

Not Kimmer. Kimmer still wanted the bad guys. And Kimmer had grown up with worse betrayals. Still, she backed Owen, standing beside him. "Except we *could have been ready for them*. Do you think real drug dealers would have risked apprehension to grab a package that small? Do you think they would have had the inclination to swoop in on a busted mule for a firefight over the goods? Terrorists and drug deals have different resources; they have different goals. We could have been ready for them — but now they're on the loose with their radioactive goods. Just how hot did you say that stuff was?"

"Dirty bomb hot," Rio muttered, and by their reaction Kimmer saw he was right. "From Lagura Verde? Probably some cobalt-60; definitely some cesium-137. Gamma ray stuff, would have triggered border patrol detectors."

God. "Then quit playing agency games with us and tell us the whole story,"

Kimmer said, snapping the words out. "We've got some bomb boys to catch."

And Rio, compassionate Rio, looked at the men with a drawn brow and said, "What about the woman?"

DuBois looked Rio in the eye and said, "She was never meant to survive — and unless she gets immediate medical attention, she won't."

Chapter Three

Bisbee, Arizona. Copper mining ghost town turned tourist town, shadows shifting in the late afternoon sun, summer heat just beginning to fade.

"Wishful thinking, *tourist town*," muttered Kimmer, shifting on the seat of the stealthy motorcycle she'd so quickly grown fond of. She'd named hers *She-Ra*. "More like a leftover skeleton town."

"Bet that even makes sense in your head somewhere," Rio said, and just grinned at her when she gave him a squinty eye.

"I was thinking," she said, "that there's no way to *not* stand out in this town. Especially if you're you. Better keep that motorcycle helmet on."

"I don't think it matters if I stand out." Which he would, with that wheat-blond hair and that height and that sculpted face. "If we spook our mule and her little radioactive package, at least we'll have a dust trail to follow."

"Won't need it," Kimmer said, hefting the radiation survey meter in her hand. "If she's anywhere around..."

They had personal dosimeters, as well, although they'd been reassured that any short-lived contact would expose them to far less than the 15 rems considered to be in the safe zone — especially if they underwent decon.

Kimmer, however, was not inclined to believe the agency contacts who had deceived them about their mission in the first place. But with the Hunter reputation on the line, and the materials for a dirty bomb somewhere here on U.S. soil, she wasn't inclined to walk away, either. Not even when the border patrol had agents crawling through Bisbee, the FBI had taken up residence in Hotel La More, and there was sure to be a Homeland Security rep here somewhere.

So they sat here outside the totally unexpected Chinese Country Antiques and waited for a certain old blue panel van to cruise by Copper Queen Plaza. It was driven by a known contact for illegal immigrants — and while the missing mule might once have expected a perfect set of papers, now she was on the run.

Kimmer just hoped she hadn't dumped the package, leaving them to track it down in the desert before the terrorist boys got their hands on it.

"Poor woman," Rio said, his voice a strange echo in her ear, both direct and via her ear-mike. "She had no idea what she was getting into. I wish we could —"

"Don't count on it," Kimmer said. She didn't need to hear the rest of that sentence to know that Rio wanted to save the woman — and that he'd already sensed Kimmer was focused on their original target. More than focused on it, given the newly revealed nature of the threat it posed. "She made a bad decision, and she's probably going to pay for it. We can't compromise recovery of that package to save her. Or *try* to save her, to judge by our little better-late-than-never briefing."

"She was used," Rio countered. "She didn't deserve this."

"No one *deserves* radiation poisoning." Kimmer held his gaze through the narrow open area of their respective full-face helmets. "But there's nothing we can do about it."

He looked away, but she knew better than to think he'd given up. Not until that woman was dead would he give up.

Didn't seem like that would take long.

"There," Rio said, lifting his head — proving he wasn't as distracted as he seemed. A blue panel van tracked a casual path along Bisbee Ave. Rio pulled out into the light traffic behind it with Kimmer right on his tail. They headed for the complicated little traffic circle at routes 80 and 92 and then turned east to the —

"Surely not," Kimmer murmured into her mike, drafting along behind Rio.

"Cemetery," Rio confirmed.

"Trite," Kimmer said. "Really trite. And it's not even a proper cemetery." Not to her eyes, not without a green lawn and vast spreading crowns of maple trees sheltering the graves. This cemetery had rough caliche ground and clumps of sparse grama grass. The spear-shaped lombardy poplars that formed rows and boundaries only served to create a spook factor. "Ugh. There's no rest in peace *here*."

Rio pulled his silent motorcycle into the tree shadows, leaving the occupants of the van some illusion of privacy as they pulled up to a fresh grave site. Kimmer sliced in ahead of him and — smaller, more compact on her bike — crept up along the shadows to gain a better vantage point, flipping up her face shield. Not so close that she didn't need the diminutive binoculars tucked away inside her leather jacket; she reached for them, never taking her eyes off the scene.

"And here comes our mule," she said, holding the binocs up and fine-tuning the focus on the woman, moving up from behind a mausoleum on the same dirt bike she'd had on the trail. Still dressed in baggy clothes, hair still lank and dirty...the harsh afternoon sun revealed the grayish nature of her complexion, the hollows of her eyes and cheeks. "Nope, she doesn't feel so good. And hot damn!" This as an old sedan crept up not far away.

"Hail, hail, the gang's unexpectedly all here," Rio noted under his breath.

"Our bomb boys," Kimmer said, her voice warm with welcome as the two men

emerged from the car. This time she'd seen their dossiers; she knew their faces. Average American melting pot faces. "But how did they find her here —?"

Rio's voice came with startled realization. "She called them. She's still trying to get her papers. To make the original trade."

Kimmer felt a jolt of respect. "Good for her." Futile, but still. "And she arranged it so she'd have the van boys for backup, too."

"With no idea what they've gotten into."

Not likely. This woman didn't have a clue how far over her head she'd gotten. Still hoping for her happily ever after here in the good old U-S-of-A — and she probably had no idea her illness was caused by the package to which she still clung. *How desperate she must be...*

"We may not be able to save her, but this meet's not going down to our bomb boys' plans," Kimmer growled. She put the binocs away, reached into her jacket for the small handmade war club she kept there. Red oak root, a lumpy ball of scrap metal worn smooth by time and use...she hefted it with familiarity and fondness. "Ready?"

Rio moved up beside her. "The noisemaker," he said, referring to the motorcycle's ability to generate noise so those in traffic would be aware of its presence. "I'll take the front, turn mine on. You and your little friend can be the sneak attack."

"My favorite," said Kimmer, and pulled down her helmet face shield. It wasn't enough to hide the wicked grin she sent at Rio. "Let's go get us some bomb boys."

Chapter Four

Not gonna make it —

Kimmer realized it as soon as they started their stealth motorcycle run toward the blue panel van — toward the fugitive woman half hidden behind it, and most important, toward the two men who wanted the stolen radioactive powder the woman had been duped into smuggling as drugs. If she truly thought she'd get her visa out of it, she'd been mistaken...but Kimmer couldn't blame her for taking this one last chance.

She could blame the bomb boys for being so treacherous, and she did. Even as she silently closed on them, even as Rio turned on the noisemaker for his own hydrogen-fueled motorcycle and drew their startled attention, the bomb boys went into action. One of them jumped the woman, wrestling with the fanny pack secured at her waist. The other turned a gun on the van, blowing out the back tires in quick succession, not the least taken aback by Rio's sudden noisy presence. He merely

turned the gun on Rio next.

And Kimmer, leaning over the silent bike, still building speed, veered away from the protection of the tree line and her chosen target — the radioactive package.

Not Rio!

She swooped in at a calculated angle and slammed her war club into the man's arm — a wicked and unexpected ambush that made him scream in surprise as much as pain. Broken, no doubt.

If it wasn't, she'd just have to come back for seconds.

But not now. Now, the gun skidded across the gritty desert soil. The two immigrants from inside the van leaped on the hapless bomb boy, and Kimmer slewed her bike around to take a run at the second target just as he separated from the woman, his gun aimed at her head and the radioactive fanny pack dangling from his hand. *Not gonna make it* —

Rio blasted between them, knocking the woman to the ground and sending the man staggering back — his gun discharged into the air. But he kept his feet and with nary a glance at his downed partner, he bolted the few yards to his sedan, diving in to crank the engine and spit gravel from spinning wheels.

Rio's noisemaker switched off, leaving them in an eerie silence — nothing left but the crunch of car tires on gravelly ground. Kimmer lined her bike up to go after the sedan, hesitating only when she realized that Rio had stopped, had straightened those long legs to brace the bike upright even as he bent over the woman.

"Rio!" she shouted, loudly enough to make him wince as it came in through his earpiece. *"The package!"*

He froze; he stopped in the act of reaching out. Then he withdrew his hand, his fingers curling into an angry fist. "Stay here," he told the woman in Spanish. "We know why you're sick. We'll come back to help you."

Kimmer knew from the look on the woman's face that it wouldn't happen; she'd bolt as soon as she could. Probably wouldn't even wait for the help of the two men in the van who'd come specifically for just that.

Nothing to be done about it. Not with the dirty bomb materials heading out of the cemetery with hasty purpose. "We can't outrun him on the road," she told Rio, and kicked the bike forward, steering across the grounds. The sedan hung in her peripheral vision, flashing behind the sepulchral landscaping and toward the exit. Kimmer leaned forward, riding the bike over the rough spots as though it were a steeplechase jumper.

Coming in behind her at a more extreme angle, Rio quickly made up ground; in moments, they rode nearly side by side. The car ignored the road at its driver's whim, cutting across the looping asphalt, bouncing and lurching over old shocks.

"Get ahead of him," Kimmer said into her mike, breathless as the bike jarred on uneven ground. "See if he wants to play chicken at the cemetery gate."

Rio sounded so close, right in her ear. "My pistol and I say he doesn't."

"Works for me," Kimmer said, and pushed the bike to the limit, splitting off from Rio to pull up alongside the sedan, pacing it a moment — and then pulling ahead, with the cemetery entrance coming up fast.

The car slowed, and Kimmer gave it a disbelieving double take. The man within it didn't look tense, or concerned, or even annoyed. Behind the glare on the windshield he —

Dammit, he was *grinning*.

He knows something. She didn't doubt the instant assessment; she didn't doubt that it would be bad for them. And when she glanced ahead to the gate, still speeding alongside the car, Rio on the other side and just as intent as she —

Just a glint. Nothing more. And they were almost upon the gates with the sedan dropping well back, to all appearances giving up, when she realized.

"Wire!" she cried. *Wire, set to stop the woman in case she ran with their goods again. "Go down, go down!"*

His surprised grunt sounded in her ear just before she laid her own bike down, leathers skidding over rocky ground, body tumbling away. The car shot past, once again in full acceleration — she heard the twang of wire breaking overhead and hunched in anticipation of the whiplash. The end of the wire snapped across the back of her helmet and she waited no longer than that before scrambling to her feet, not waiting to see if everything still worked.

"Rio!"

She yanked her helmet off, losing the ear bud in the process — and then had to dive out of the way when the blue van came bearing down on her, chasing on the heels of the woman's dirt bike. She landed hard beside Rio, sparing the speeding procession little more than a glare as she pulled herself to her hands and knees — a little more slowly this time.

And by then Rio was rolling over, getting to his knees; tugging on his own helmet. "*Damn!*"

She knew by the way he held himself that he'd wrenched his back. And she knew by the tone of his voice that he wasn't thinking about his back at all.

They'd lost the radioactive powder. They'd lost the woman. They'd lost the men who could lead them to her again.

"Damn," Kimmer echoed. And then, "I think I broke one of them."

"Not in so many pieces he can't talk?"

"Not yet," she told him. "Let's go see how long he can keep it that way."

Chapter Five

"They should have let me talk to the guy. We *did* catch him." Kimmer tried to keep her anger from her hands as they worked along Rio's back in the privacy of their Bisbee, Arizona, hotel room. She straddled his hips, sitting back on his firm posterior to massage the strained muscles of his back.

His extremely *clean* back — just like the rest of him, and Kimmer, as well. Their personal dosimeters had shown their exposure to the radioactive payload to be negligible, but the Hunter Agency operated on a better safe than sorry policy, and she and Rio had undergone a thorough decontamination. No doubt so had the single bomb boy they'd caught, broken arm and all.

But he wasn't talking. Not yet. And the border patrol agents who'd descended on the area had lost the trail of radioactivity only a block from the cemetery rendezvous. No doubt the bomb boys had been prepared with a lead-lined container, just as they'd been prepared to stop a motorcycle escape.

"I could have gotten something from him," Kimmer said, thinking of that nuclear fuel rod on the loose — the pellets ground to powder, ready for dispersal via dirty bomb. "Even if he thought he wasn't telling us anything at all..."

Rio grunted agreement. "Interagency turf wars...and Hunter is the independent. None of them want us to get the scoop." He made a pained sound, and Kimmer guiltily eased her touch on his back, the scar tissue knotted and inflexible under her fingers. "And your knack for reading people...it's hard to explain."

"They didn't believe it, you mean." Even though they'd earlier avoided her for that same reason. They wanted it both ways — and they had the authority to demand it.

"Hmm," he said, by way of agreement. His muscles finally began to relax under Kimmer's touch. After the decon, they'd hit the hotel hot tub, pretending they weren't listening for the ring of the phone, the call back to action. Pretending they weren't fuming at being left out of the interrogation of the man they'd apprehended.

"You'd think," Kimmer said, moving to massage his shoulders and unable to resist the temptation to trail her fingers up his neck, "they'd do anything to keep our bomb boys from building their dirty bomb. Even if the whole threat of those things is so greatly exaggerated. Radiological Dispersion Device — instant unnecessary public panic."

"That's not fair," Rio said, and he meant her touch on his neck, and the way she'd made the hair at his nape stand on end. Goose bumps. He turned his head just enough to give her a meaningful eye, and then settled again. "The danger from RDDs is real enough. It's just not the danger everyone thinks of."

Not the instant deaths, he meant. Not the radiation poisoning, not the potential cancers. Only those in the direct blast zone were at risk to inhale particles, or to swallow them — and there were preventative treatments for such people.

No, the real effects would come later. The economic costs of large scale, long-term evacuations. The cleanup and demolition costs — Hurricane Katrina all over again, with radiation on the side.

Kimmer scowled at the back of Rio's head — and then, to make up for it, bent over to delicately lick behind his ear. He made a growling noise and shifted beneath her. But she hadn't distracted him from the matter at hand, not completely. "We should go after her," he said.

Kimmer stilled. "Our nameless mule, you mean." The woman who'd been duped into smuggling in what she'd thought to be drugs — and who didn't have much longer to live after carrying the powdered fuel rod pellets over the border. "She doesn't know anything, Rio. She didn't even know what she had in her hands — and she sure doesn't have it, anymore."

"We don't know *what* she knows," Rio said, his voice muffled by the bedsheets. "At the least she's got names and faces, and we should check her out. Not to mention that it's the right thing to do." Yup, that was Rio. Conditioned by his family to consider the individual just as important as the big picture — or more so. And completely aware that Kimmer not only looked at the big picture, but had less reason to forgive people those things that got them into trouble with the law.

But she kept her response low-key. "Our friendly alphabet soup collection told us to stand down until they extract some sort of direction from their new prisoner." The border patrol, Homeland Security, the FBI...they were all in on it.

Rio snorted softly. "Since when do you pay attention to what the Powers That Be tell you?"

Kimmer poked his shoulder, but kept it gentle. "Since it'll get Owen in a big whopping load of trouble if I don't."

He was silent a moment, which she didn't much like. Rio was all easy-going, all natural ease. Didn't fret, just got things done.

The tension beneath her felt an awful lot like fretting. Or possibly like a man who was about to draw a line.

When he took a deep breath, she felt sure of it. "I'm not sure this works for me," he said. "I joined Hunter so we could work together...so I could do my good deeds in the world. But I've got my own definition of *good deed*. Owen understood that well enough after that business in Pittsburgh with your brother. If I'm going to work this gig, I've got to feel there's something to it. That there's —" and he cut his words short, probably afraid of sounding just a little too *Lord of the Rings*.

Not a problem for Kimmer. "You want there to be honor in it," she said. "Like, maybe, in saving people from a dirty bomb? You'd risk trading an urban population for one woman? A woman who might already be dead?"

"Except that you're assuming she can't be of help to us. What do we lose in looking for her, Kimmer? As opposed to sitting here in this hotel room like good little puppets, waiting for a pat on the head and permission to go do our jobs?"

Kimmer stroked along the top of his shoulder. Nothing provocative this time...just plain old reaching out. The kind of touch she'd learned from Rio himself. "I don't think I've ever heard you this..." she hunted for the word, found it, and still had trouble applying it to Rio. "Bitter."

He turned beneath her, dropping his head back to look up at her with dark eyes a little wry, and yes...a little bitter. "Only because you didn't see me when I was still hooked up to tubes and catheters and morphine, coming to terms with the agency's failures. With the cost of those failures."

"It was just one person," Kimmer said. "One person with bad judgment."

"And a system that didn't protect my asset from the situation. Or my own personal ass." Rio shook his head, wheat-blond hair falling back from his forehead. "We lost more than just a foreign agent coming in from the cold that day. We lost my friend. If I'm getting into the business again, it'll be on my terms. And that means not losing sight of the individuals caught up in our little games."

She regarded him in silence, but not for long. Then she shrugged, her hands resting on his chest, her toes hooked under his knees. "Okay," she said. "Then we do both. We do it all. Bomb boys, sick mule, gamma ray package. Right?"

He grinned up at her. "You say the sweetest things."

Yeah. Right. Do it all.

Somehow.

Chapter Six

Kimmer stood in a part of Bisbee where tourists shouldn't go. A rough spot, stuck at the end of town like an afterthought of meanness.

Good thing she wasn't a tourist.

"Owen," she'd said into the phone that late afternoon, "Rio and I are going sightseeing in Bisbee. We have a package to gift wrap."

And he'd been silent just long enough so she knew he understood — that he should avoid asking pointed questions if he wanted to disavow knowledge of their activity. That she was giving him the chance to say *absolutely not*.

But Owen had said, "Good luck with that. If you need a lift back to the hotel, let me know."

All his way of saying he'd back them up if it came to that.

So with much cheer, she and Rio had scoured Bisbee's rough spots, asking questions and not particularly trying to hide their outsider's nature or their intent. No point, not with the suits sweeping through before them. No one would have talked to

them, anyway — and no one did. For no one in the Hispanic community had any intention of answering her questions — of revealing their underground places, or of betraying the very sick woman now among them.

But they did it all the same. Subtle reactions to Kimmer's words, the lies they chose in response to Rio's questions...together they worked around the edges of town, from the taco stand with the best tacos ever made to a tiny tattoo parlor still decorated with pathetic tatters of Cinco de Mayo streamers. And they'd ended up here, in nastyville, close enough to their quarry so it was time to step lightly. If the woman could still run, she would.

Kimmer eyed the battered adobe building across the street from them, pondering their best approach. "We could just go ahead and flush her, grab her up at the back."

"Or I could go inside as a customer," Rio suggested, his tone all innocence. The battered adobe building was, to all appearances, a small-time whorehouse.

"Yeah," Kimmer told him. "You do that."

"It's not like *you* could —" But he broke off, realizing what he'd done. Looking at her — small but wiry and much stronger than she appeared, her demeanor whatever she wished it to be — he winced. Hunter hadn't given her the code name Chimera for nothing.

"Oh," she said, already one step toward the adobe, "I *could*."

He winced again, but this time in resignation. "Expect the unexpected. The definition of you."

Kimmer smiled sweetly at him. "Besides, it might just get us farther. I'm not as physically threatening."

"Not outwardly," he agreed.

"See if you can saunter around back without looking too conspicuous," she suggested. Between the crumbling old parking lot on one side and the tiny shop of cluttering religious icons on the other, cover was as sparse as the desert landscape.

But those same circumstances made it easy to spot their recently arrived tail. Lurking at the corner a block away, grinding a cigarette under his heel. Twilight obscured his features, but Kimmer could read that body language easily enough. "Ooh," she said. "Company."

Rio looked from the man to the adobe building, his reluctance clear. "She could be right *there* —"

"And this guy could know where the bomb powder is stashed."

"This guy is only here to clean up what they left behind." Meaning the woman. Illegal immigrant, unwitting terrorist.

"You think that's a chance we can take?" Kimmer didn't. But she softened at the conflict on Rio's face nonetheless. "I know I said we'd try to do it all. Save the world, save the woman. But —"

"We could split up."

She tipped her head to scrutinize him — his expression, his body language. Her knack was no good at reading him; it never had been. It was like that with those who were too close to her. She asked, "You okay with that? Splitting up?"

Muscles played across his jaw. "No," he said, just a little too sharply. "So how do you want to handle it?"

"Easy," she said lightly. "Let's head for the corner. If he's here after our mule, he won't even notice us. If he's been following us around in the hopes of finding the mule, then he's gonna know he's been made. Bet he runs."

"Okay," he said, and held out his hand, turning them back into a couple. "Let's take a walk."

"Sure," she said, twining her fingers in his. "You and me and our various concealed weapons. Sounds idyllic." There. That got a smile from him.

But not for long. Sooo casually, the bomb boy walked away, down the street toward the center of town.

Such as it was.

Behind them, the squeal of tires and the smell of burnt rubber testified as to another kind of runner. *The woman...someone saw us. Recognized us.* She'd been in that building, all right — she just wasn't there, anymore. Rio's fingers tightened on hers. She might have heard him growl frustration.

After a slight squeeze in return, Kimmer disengaged her hand. As they passed a tiny alley before the corner bodega, she slipped behind the building and sprinted full speed to the opposite corner of the store. Along the way, she withdrew her sleek SIG Sauer. A quick glance into the pools of insipid streetlight and she marked the man's progress just as Rio rounded the corner alone. Suspicion crossed the man's face — but he was too late. As he passed the alley, Kimmer pushed the SIG's cold metal barrel into the vulnerable skin just behind his ear. "Please, sir, can you tell me the way to the stolen fuel rod?"

He may have thought she couldn't understand his Spanish cursing; he may not have cared. She tsked, anyway. "Hey, just asking directions here. The Visitor's Bureau will have you replaced if you keep that up." And by then Rio was behind him, his larger pistol secure in the small of the man's back.

"Talk to the lady nicely," he murmured in the man's ear in his American-accented Spanish. "I'm in a bad mood."

The man got the message. The look on his face told her so...and it also told her that he wasn't going to talk to them. He'd martyr himself first. *Dammit.* If they took him in, they'd learn nothing; they'd lose him to the alphabet soup suits. They'd already lost the woman. If Kimmer didn't do something fast, they'd come out of another night with nothing. No woman, no ex-fuel rod, no information.

She stepped closer to him, within range of any counterstrike he might dare to

make — and she nodded Rio back. *Trust me*, she told him with that gesture. And then, into their captive's ear, so softly, "We know where the woman is headed; our people will have her soon enough. Before she dies, she'll tell us names, faces, meeting places.... We'll find your friends, and we'll even find that fuel rod. Now's your only chance to play nice. You talk to me now, and maybe I won't use your front pocket to carry that powder when we get it. Or maybe you've had kids already?"

"*Putá!*" he spat.

"Ah," she said. "But not your *puta*. I'm a capitalist dog *puta* and this is my game." She glanced at Rio. "Coast is clear?"

And though he had no idea what she was up to, he said, "It's clear."

"Let's have a little talk in this alley, then." But when she reached to drag him in, she let her gun slip away from behind his ear, to skid right off the back of his neck. He was no slouch. He grabbed her. *Better have read this one right, gringa*, she told herself in that split second before he slammed her against the building, *whamwhamwham* in quick succession, and sprinted away down the street.

Rio might not understand, but he backed her. He knew well enough that she'd left that opening; he let the man run, already at Kimmer's side and steadying her. "That could have gone wrong so many ways —"

"But it didn't." She rubbed her jaw where her teeth had bounced off each other during all that whamming. "He's running off to tattle — to tell someone my little fib about having the woman pinned down. They'll race to find her first. We'll have to be there when they do."

Rio's look turned grim. "You just let one of the bomb boys go."

"I just did exactly that."

"If we don't play this right, we walk away with nothing. Again."

Kimmer moved close to him, standing at the edge of the streetlight's aura. "You wanted to save the mule? This is our chance to do it. If we play our cards right, we can end up in the same place at the same time...and we can grab the bomb boys and help the mule. Everyone's happy. But when you want it all...it doesn't come without risk."

His expression shifted, rapid understanding and gratitude and then something fierce and possessive. Finally his gaze went distant. Looking ahead. "If they reach her before we do..."

Kimmer pushed away from the building, finding her legs steady again. "Then we won't let it happen. Let's go talk to whoever's left at that warehouse."

Rio nodded, trying to hide his worry and not succeeding.

"Hey," she said. "We can do this."

And they would, because they had to. Their bomb boy, escaped; the woman, gone. They were running out of options.

Chapter Seven

Kimmer walked into the adobe building as if she'd been there a dozen times before. Not an airy building, this one. Old and small and close, smelling of old clay, with cracks festooning the walls near the ceiling and rounded corners worn by time. Several women lounged along the wall — young and old, on the verge of being used up; all Latina. One woman sat behind a rickety wooden desk, a simplistic ledger open before her and a broken mug holding pencil stubs and battered pens.

The room darkened — that was Rio, standing in the doorway behind her. The women drew together, and Kimmer approached the desk, not making any effort to hide her intensity. She and Rio had been seen, after all; their quarry had bolted from this building. No point in being coy now. She started the conversation in Spanish. "Where did she go?"

"You must be in the wrong place." The woman's resentment glimmered through the bored look she'd pasted on her face. "This isn't for a woman."

Kimmer gave the occupants a pointed glance. "Then we're all in the wrong place. Where did she go?"

The woman just snorted, leaned back in a chair that might give way at any moment, and folded her arms across her chest. The following silence was a loud one.

"Here's how it is," Kimmer said. "We know she's sick. She's dying, in fact. We'd like to help her. We also know there are men in this town who want to finish her off, and they're as close to finding her as we are."

A shrug greeted her words. She heard Rio shift in the doorway, as fidgety as he ever got. And she knew why, too — thanks to her, those men were hunting the woman more fervently than ever.

She looked straight into those flat black-brown eyes. "Okay, this is also how it is. I'm working with a bunch of fancy-pants investigators. They haven't found your friend because they're more interested in the men. But they're the sort of people who like to go around cleaning things up, and if I happen to tell them the woman came through here, it would bring a lot of attention your way. Government-type attention. Policia. Immigration. I don't suppose you've all got green cards?"

That caused a stir of distress along the wall. Better a whore here than a whore in Mexico, apparently.

The woman stayed hard. "And I believe this...why?"

"Because you were watching when we chased one of those men away. And since we're the ones who came back...draw your own conclusions." Kimmer showed her

teeth.

"Look," Rio said. "She's going to *die*. She was exposed to some bad stuff. Tell me you're not surprised she could even get up to leave this place."

One of the women by the wall said, "Flaco helped her —"

And the woman at the desk gave them all an annoyed scowl. "And Flaco will take it out on us if anyone finds his place."

Kimmer plucked a pen from the broken mug and handed it over. "Write it down." She tapped the corner of the ledger. "Or when Flaco gets back, we'll be here waiting, and we'll start asking him the same questions."

The woman stared at Kimmer, weighing her options — and then hissed air between her teeth and snatched the pen. She scribbled an address on the corner of the ledger and tore it off with an annoyed flourish, presenting it to Kimmer. And Kimmer looked at Rio and grinned.

* * *

"We should call Owen," Rio suggested. They sat on their motorcycles out on the edge of the desert, up a thousand feet from Bisbee and outside a little collection of adobe homes that used to be associated with the nearest copper mine. Dim light showed through the curtains of the particular house they watched.

Kimmer shook her head. "He wouldn't be able to pretend he didn't know what we were up to if we did that. Later."

"We're only assuming the bomb guys will find this place."

"They knew which building we were watching. They'll follow the trail, just as we did. And they're more familiar with this area." Kimmer drew up the collar of her leather jacket. "If I'd known we were going to head uphill, I'd have worn something warmer."

Rio gazed at the pimp's house, apparently oblivious to the same cold that sneaked into Kimmer's bones. "Flaco. He's hoping she'll get better so he can add her to his collection."

"Yeah." Kimmer hunched her shoulders against that cold...against reality. She touched her war club inside her jacket, her thigh holster, the cluster of war darts tucked in her back pocket. Locked and loaded and ready to go. The night-vision goggles hung off her handlebars, but she didn't think this would turn into a stalking game.

"Hey," he said.

She looked his way in the darkness.

"Thanks."

She could have pretended not to know what he was talking about. It would have been easier. It's what she would have done eighteen months earlier, before she'd ever believed a man like Rio existed. Someone who could be so different, and yet understand — and accept — her. Someone who could show her glimpses of another way to live, and still let her find her own way there. So she didn't pretend. "You're welcome."

"And you're right," he said. "About priorities. If we'd had no choice...we'd have had to stick with the bomb boys. Get that powder back."

"Choices are good," she told him, thinking that it was probably too late in any event. Thinking that they might yet have to let the woman go in their efforts to retrieve the package. But... "Creating our own choices is even better. I don't like being cornered." She looked over at him, grinned wickedly in the darkness. "Doing the impossible...one of my favorite things."

"Listen," Rio said, cocking his head at the sound of an approaching vehicle, one that traveled far too fast for the state of the road and the lack of light. "I think you're about to get your chance."

Chapter Eight

Kimmer had no intention of getting fancy. They'd found the woman...they'd lured the bomb boys to find her with renewed purpose. And now it was time to wrap things up in one tidy little sting, descending on the small adobe house to apprehend the terrorists and save the woman sickened by their stolen fuel rod.

"Watch the back," she suggested to Rio as they thoughtfully flattened the tires of the bomb boys' car. "I'll hit the front. They're not as likely to run from me."

"More fools, they." Rio's teeth gleamed briefly in the darkness, a quick grin. "You need help, you shout."

She still wasn't used to having the option, and had to grin back. "Sounds good to me."

From within the house came shouting; they couldn't wait any longer. Kimmer ran for the house while Rio loped around the back, avoiding an abandoned car axle and a broken grocery cart before he disappeared around the side.

Kimmer didn't knock. She didn't even hesitate. She kicked the flimsy door out of her way — and she didn't stop until her SIG's muzzle ran up against the back of a bomb boy's skull. Fast. Tidy. Freezing the action: the woman sat on a cot in the corner of a crowded room, too sick to get up even though she'd evidently tried. Flaco the pimp, hands in the air and smear of greasy beard on his face, backed up against the far wall, gauging the distance between his position and the archway to the next room. And two bomb boys, guns in hand, froze in place, knowing better than

to move.

"Avon calling," she told them, and then raised her voice. "Hey, Avon man — let them know I'm not alone."

From the back of the house, Rio's amused voice said, "She's not alone."

The bomb boy at the end of her gun stayed perfectly still. "Who are you? Not cops."

"Not cops." Kimmer wrenched the man's revolver from his hand, thumbed open the wheel to dump the bullets, and tossed it out into the darkness. "Think of us as troublesome independents."

"Hey, man, I got nothing to do with this," Flaco said. "I was just trying to help."

"Oh, please," Kimmer said to him, bumping the SIG against her captive's spine as his back tensed in a way that meant he was thinking of trouble. Multitasking, that was her. "Innocent, you're not. You're just not who I'm looking for. At least, not tonight."

"How about I...leave?" he suggested, tentative and sly and weaselly all at the same time.

She ignored him, and spoke to the woman as she reached for the Flex-Cuffs stashed in her back pocket. "We're here to help you," she said. "We know why you're sick. In fact, these guys know why you're sick, too. They never intended for you to survive your trip across the border with your little radioactive package."

"Whoa," Flaco said. "I don't know nothing about —"

Kimmer kept her voice unconcerned. "Shut up. This isn't about you." She watched the sick woman, waiting for signs of understanding...hoping it wasn't too late. "This is about letting her know that she's not going from bad to worse because we're here. Bad to better, actually." She yanked the flexible riot cuffs into place around her bomb boy's wrist, and jerked it behind his back. "Give me the other one, glow-boy."

Reluctantly, he did. She completed his restraint and stepped back just far enough to plant her foot squarely on his scrawny ass, shoving him across the room. He couldn't keep his balance, stumbling into a ratty futon chair before he went down. Kimmer eyed the second man, whose gun still pointed at Flaco, frozen there when she'd burst in.

Flaco said, "You're right. This isn't about me. How about I just leave?"

She tipped her head slightly, assessing him. *Total asshole. Pimpish weaselly asshole. Coward to boot.* Not to be trusted...but not part of this.

From the back of the house came a scuffling sound — wood breaking, glass breaking...and what might have been bone breaking. And Rio, breathless, muttering, "Idiot." And then to Kimmer. "Be with you in — *dammit* —" more scuffling, glass crunching underfoot "— a moment —"

A lurker from the bomb boy team, going down.

"Take your time." Kimmer nodded at the pimp, jerked her chin at the door. "You're in my way. Get lost."

He wasted no time abandoning the woman, whose grayish color couldn't possibly be a good thing. He eased through the frozen tableau of the room and then bolted for the yard. "Your turn," she told the second bomb boy. "Toss the gun, and turn around. I'm into bondage tonight."

"If you take us in, you'll never find what you're looking for," the bomb boy said. At the back, a wooden ripping sound seemed to indicate the door had parted ways with the hinges. Rio called, "Almost done here —"

Kimmer just grinned at the bomb boy. "By the time we take you *in*, we'll have found what we're looking for," she said. "Remember? Not cops. We have our own procedures." Which weren't so flexible as that comment might imply, but he didn't have to know.

She had only an instant's warning, the feeling of presence behind her. She ducked, whirling, and took a jarring blow to her shoulder — only barely realizing that Flaco had returned, had scavenged the revolver and used it as a cudgel. She ducked the brunt of a second blow, going down on one knee as her gun fell from numbed fingers. *Not just a coward. An opportunist —;*

Not to be trusted. She should have paid more attention. The man had seen opportunity to get in good with some heavy hitters — and he'd taken it.

The bomb boys scrambled to take advantage of the break. Kimmer ignored them, dropping the flexible restraint to dig at her other back pocket, doing a tuck and roll and coming up with a war dart. A throwing tool, it was — but sharp enough to do a turn as a stiletto if circumstances demanded.

Circumstances did.

She jammed the stout metal spike into the back of Flaco's knee, shoving until the point grated against bone. He screamed and fell — but he still fumbled at the gun with a purpose, moaning and cursing.

She took her chances, turning back to the bomb boys even as she freed another war dart, slipping it into throwing position. She found pretty much what she expected — one bomb boy still frantically trying to free himself, which he wouldn't. The other completely smug that Kimmer's dominant hand was useless, her gun on the floor. "You or her," he said, picking the easy, closer target and jamming his gun into her temple even as she retched weakly. "Or both."

"Leave her alone," Kimmer said, her heart sinking. They'd come so close...so damned close. "She's worth nothing as a hostage. She's already dead."

"But you said —"

"I was trying to be *nice*," she told him, trying not to see the despair on the woman's face. "Make her feel a little better before she kicked off. Nope, you blew it. You should have aimed that gun at me."

But behind her, Flaco gave a primal scream of intent, inspiring renewed triumph on the bomb boy's face. He still had an ally, and now she was trapped between the two of them and about to go down —

Rio!

Here he came, charging through with blood dripping from his hand and smeared across his face, fast on his feet in spite of his size — and intent. Oh so intent. Blowing through the little room to launch himself at the pimp. Kimmer dove away, and the bomb boy took his moment, shoving the woman away so hard she tumbled right off the cot, taking aim at Kimmer —

But not before Kimmer rolled to her feet and let fly with a dart he never even saw before it sunk into his eye...and beyond. He folded like a rag doll.

Kimmer staggered to her feet, thrown off balance by her tingling, useless arm as she kicked the man's gun away from his limp hand. "There's a *reason* I practice with both hands."

* * *

"Owen," Kimmer said into her cell phone, flexing her fingers in the cold darkness of the front yard. Or trying to, but at least the little spasm of movement was an improvement. In the house, Rio had stacked disabled and deceased bad guys and now tended the woman, reassuring her that Kimmer's words had been a ploy. "Hey, we got 'em wrapped up for the suits. Bomb boys and their mule, with a pimp on the side. And send an ambulance. Or two."

"You have them *all*?"

"You betcha, and the bomb boys are already singing. I think if you tell our suit friends to hit the farmer's co-op, you'll find what you want in the freezer, in a lead box inside a cooler."

Owen was shaking his head. She didn't have to see it; she could hear it in his voice. "When you do things your own way, you don't think small."

Kimmer grinned, glancing through the open door to the captive baddies and her very own partner, offering water to the sick woman. "Nope. We did this one *our* way. Better get used to it, Owen — *neither* of us think small."

The End