



Dusty Road Home

Isabella

Summary

Melanie Crenshaw has fallen off the proverbial map. Notoriously private on a good day, the world-famous mystery author has gone dark to avoid any public blowback or scandal from her latest failed relationship. Seeking quiet and solace, she retreats to her rural hometown, hoping isolation will be just the atmosphere she needs to finish her novel. But going back home is never as easy as it sounds, especially when a nosy reporter starts sniffing around.

Pulitzer-winning investigative journalist Pilar Stein has seen people at their worst—and has the scars to prove it. After taking time off to heal from a particularly brutal assignment, she's back in the saddle and ready to reclaim her place among the elite of hard-hitting reporters. Unfortunately, her re-entry story—a profile on elusive author Melanie Crenshaw who has suddenly disappeared—seems to lack the teeth necessary to catapult her back to the top of her game.

Appearances are deceiving, of course, and Pilar soon discovers that what she deems a simple fluff piece might well lead to the scoop of a generation...just not the one she expected.

As Melanie fights to maintain her privacy while Pilar takes a backhoe to her past, the two women find themselves torn between their own professional convictions and their growing attraction to each other. And no matter which road they take, it's going to be a bumpy ride.

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ISABELLA



SAPPHIRE BOOKS

SALINAS, CALIFORNIA

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Dedication

To the love of my life!

Chapter One

Mel hung her head out the window and let the sun beat down on her. She wanted to enjoy what was left of the autumn warmth. She'd spent so much time in the sun lately that her freckles were poppin' like it was the middle of summer, but it was okay. She didn't need to worry about her appearance anymore. Max laid his head on her leg and sprawled out on the bench seat of the truck. He'd adjusted well to the country life, too well in fact. He found joy chasing chickens, and if she didn't know better, he was a cow wrangler in a former life.

She took a deep breath. The smell of cut hay filled the air just as a bug splattered on her face.

"Jesus Christ," she said, twisting the rearview mirror toward her so she could wipe the guts off her cheek. "Fucking bugs."

Whop, whop, whop.

Pfff.

Mel closed her eyes and sighed. Why did God have to take a beautiful day and turn it to crap? She looked around her as she heard the distinct sound of a flat tire. She tried to see which side of the truck the sound was coming from. Looking back through the window, sure enough, she'd lost a tire. Pulling off the road, she slid off the seat, her cowboy boots kicking up dust as she slammed the truck door.

"Stay, Max," she said, pointing to the seat. She wasn't in the mood to chase him in the event he saw a prairie dog. She wasn't sure, but she could almost swear he tossed her a smile as he laid his head out the open window.

Mel kicked the flat tire. "God dammit. Couldn't you just give me twenty more miles till I got into town?"

Slipping under the truck, she dropped the spare and jack onto the dirt so she could change the threadbare tire.

The sound of a car passing by made Mel twist under the truck and watch as the driver slammed on the brakes and came back in reverse. They got little traffic this far out, so another car on the road made her pay attention.

"Hey. Can you help a girl out?"

Mel looked sideways from under the truck, spotting a set of feet in sandals standing next to her jeans and boots. The word *contrast* popped into her mind. No one dressed like that out here, so she had to be a lost tourist looking for the ever-elusive ball of twine, trucks punched into the scorched desert, or some other tourist trap. She definitely wasn't one of those tree-huggers Mel had seen often in town, their backpacks covered in state park patches, water bottles hanging down and bumping off slender, short-clad thighs. Oh, how easily her mind wandered to those girls who wore short-shorts and hiking boots.

"Sure, what can I do ya?" she said, scooting out from under the pickup. She slipped her cowboy hat on and pushed it low, just above her sunglasses. Mel couldn't help but give the woman a once-over. Tan, fit, and feminine was her type—if she even had a type anymore. Women should come with warning stickers like "drama queen" or "shit show."

She kept her back to the woman and dusted herself off.

"Christ." Looking at the spare tire, it wasn't any better than the one she was taking off. Getting new tires had slipped her mind when the water heater blew. The coming winter wasn't the time of year you wanted to be without a water heater. Then again, when one lived so far out in the sticks and UPS

and mail service refused to deliver heavy items, transportation was a smidge more important. Hell, if she needed to, she could've dipped water from the trough for a sponge bath.

"Well, sir, I'm looking for ...thirteen Old Wire Road."

Double shit.

"Huh." Mel rolled the tire to the side of the truck and leaned it against the body. Slipping the lug wrench on the nut, she cranked down on it, barely budging the damn thing.

"Do you know where it is or not?"

Mel gave a sideways glance toward the Mercedes she drove up in. Black, a 200 Sport Coupe. The big brass Coach emblem between the toes of her sandals and flowing Vera Wang sundress all spelled money to Mel. They screamed, "Look at me." It was hard to not notice the way the sundress danced around her body. *Damn, she's soft on the eyes.*

"I do, but you won't find anyone out there."

"How do you know?" She peeked between the sunglasses and floppy brim of her sun hat.

"They left for town. Probably won't be back for hours, if they didn't go out of town, that is."

"Shit."

"You probably should have called before making the trek out so far."

"Funny guy. I would call, but her number isn't listed. I'm on a deadline. Christ." The woman slapped down her flowing dress that was threatening to blow up around her waist. Mel was rooting for the wind. At least then the flat tire would be offset by something entertaining.

"Huh." Mel finished, pulling the lug nuts and dropping them into the hubcap with a clank. Jerking up and down on the jack, she lifted the old truck to one side and spun the tire, making sure it was clear of the ground.

"Jesus Christ, why does this always happen to me? Another fucking goose chase looking for Melanie Crenshaw. Why do I always get the reclusive, unstable assholes?"

Mel bent her head down lower, tempted to spout off, but she just kept working on changing the spare. So, the woman was on a mission. Too bad; she wouldn't mind engaging the woman further, but her then secret would be revealed, and Mel wasn't in the mood to explain why she'd left the big city and come home for some peace.

"Do you know Melanie Crenshaw?"

"Heard of her, but I don't...nope."

"Hmm. Of course you don't. I'm out here in the boonies and no one knows anyone. I wouldn't be surprised if I started hearing banjo music any minute."

Mel frowned at the comment. She didn't consider her hometown to be a parody of a movie. They might not be as enlightened as the liberal big city, but they weren't hicks either. Jesus, why did people stereotype small towns? "We all pretty much keep to ourselves out here, ma'am."

"Of course you do." The woman stepped back as Mel hoisted the busted tire and threw it in the bed. As Mel slapped at her pants, the woman stepped back farther, clearly worried her off-yellow spring dress would be a dirt magnet.

"Well, if you hear of Melanie Crenshaw or know someone who might know her, can you call me? I would really appreciate it." She handed Mel her business card.

Mel fanned the card between her fingers. "She owe you money or something?"

"No." Pilar was too focused on her phone as she answered. "I just wanted to chat with her. Do you get phone service out here? I can't seem to get a signal." Pilar lifted her phone and turned in a small circle.

"Well, if you get closer to town, you'll get a signal. It's kinda spotty out here."

“Of course it is. Damn.” Pilar gave her a quick once-over and then looked at her phone again, dismissing Mel’s very presence.

Mel examined the card closer. A dirty thumbprint was planted next to the name: Pilar Stein. Mel studied the woman again. The name rang a bell, but Mel couldn’t put her finger on why. Well, that was a dichotomy. She didn’t exactly look like a Pilar, but then she didn’t look like a Stein either.

“If you see her, can you pass on my business card and let her know I’ll be in town for a few days?”

“Sure.”

“Great, thanks.” Pilar strolled back to her car, cursing under her breath. “Cute dog, by the way.”

Mel didn’t respond to the comment. Instead, she was mesmerized by the sundress floating around the woman as she flounced off. The last view was the way the dress hugged her ass as she walked away.

“Too bad,” she muttered as she slipped off her work gloves and slapped them against her thigh. Covering her eyes, she checked the location of the sun. It was still high, and she had a good few hours more of daylight. Enough to get to town and back with another load of lumber, feed, and a new water heater. “Well, I hope you find what you’re looking for, ma’am,” Mel said to the receding taillights. Panic and anxiety raced through her. She didn’t like being the center of attention, and a reporter snooping around town could be dangerous for her and her family.

Mel pulled her hat off her head and ran her fingers through her newly shorn tresses, suddenly thankful for the new look and weight loss. She wouldn’t recommend the breakup diet, but if it was just weight that she had to worry about, Mel would take it. It was clear that the woman had mistaken her for a man.

Tucking the business card into her jeans, she slid into the driver’s seat, kicked the column shift down, and tried not to peel out. The more distance she put between her and the stranger, the better she’d feel. Besides, her stomach was growling and one of George’s burgers sounded great right about now. Looking in her rearview mirror, she tried to watch the Mercedes barrel down the road before it was completely out of sight. She suspected she hadn’t seen the last of the woman in the yellow spring dress with the sun-drenched skin.

Max leaned against the passenger door and poked his head out of the window. The wind ruffled his mouth open as he tried to bite at the current. He was the best company she could hope for, and she couldn’t imagine life without him.

Mel suspected what the hound wanted was a lunge around the county. She wasn’t in the right frame of mind to talk about the reasons she’d run from the city to the country, so she was glad Max couldn’t talk. No, Mel didn’t need reminding, as she thought about it every damn day. It haunted her dreams. Every free moment it crowded out other thoughts, torturing her on an endless loop of that week. Crushing longing was a constant companion everywhere she went, so no, she didn’t want to talk to Pilar Stein about anything. The woman’s card didn’t say “reporter” or sport a publication logo, but Mel had heard the way she’d said “deadline” and knew that she was on some sort of journalistic beat. Mel had always been extremely guarded about her private life, granting interviews only when her literary agent insisted it was necessary to promote her latest book. But she drew the line when it came to talking about her personal life, and that wasn’t about to change anytime soon. Unfortunately, despite leaving the city to escape the prying eyes of cell phone cameras and gossip chasers, she wasn’t in full control of what people might say about her. While the relationship—and breakup—with Jill Steele had all been on the down low, that didn’t mean that people who knew would keep her secret. Especially Jill’s husband, who had made it his mission to confront her.

He'd found her at the quiet, tucked-away coffee shop that served as her second office and self-imposed time-out place where there was always a discarded daily paper for distraction. The only other person who knew about the place was her assistant. So how did he accidentally show up?

Her head buried in her computer, she hadn't noticed the man standing in front of her, his arms crossed and his face a study in poorly controlled anger management.

Without looking up, she said, "Can I help you?"

He didn't say a word. Instead, he dropped an envelope on her laptop and waited.

Mel picked it up; its heft was deceiving. Several pictures slid out from the cramped space they'd been shoved into. She didn't need to take them all out if these were any indication of what was left inside.

"How much do you want?" It was always about money. This wasn't her first blackmail scheme, and she was sure if she continued to be out in the public eye, there would be more. It was one of the reasons she'd tried to keep her relationship with Jill such a secret.

"I don't want your fucking money. I want my wife back."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Mel resisted the urge to look at the man. Luckily the coffee shop was almost empty, somewhere between the morning grind and the liquid lunch crowd. It was her favorite time of day.

"Please leave." Mel ordered.

"I'm not going anywhere. You and me are gonna have a talk and get this shit settled."

A shower of photos cascaded across her computer and the table, some landing on the floor.

"Does this ring a bell?" The man shoved a particularly explicit photo under her nose. "Look at it."

Mel glanced up at the man, his face enraged, the blood vessels in his neck and face bulging. "If you don't leave, I'll be forced to call the police, Mister..."

"You know who the fuck I am, bitch." He picked up a handful of photos and threw, many hitting Mel in the face. "Don't come around my wife again, or you'll be sorry. She's mine and always will be," he said, leaning down and menacingly whispering in Mel's ear.

What was it about men who viewed all the women in their lives like possessions? She'd had enough of the entitled prick. "You should probably talk to Jill and find out why she would leave such a fine specimen of toxic masculinity. Then again, I think you could probably answer that question for her, couldn't you?"

Mel stood, and just as she did, he grabbed her by the neck, practically lifting her off her feet. She clawed at the fingers cutting off her life, but he only tightened. Without thinking, she jerked her knee forward and hit him square in the balls. His grip lessened a fraction when she raked his face with her fingernails. The barista came around the corner and laced his beefy arm around his neck and took him to the ground. Wrapping his legs around the idiot's midsection, he held him until the man passed out.

"Nice work," Mel said as the kid rolled the man off him.

"Thanks. I'm hoping for a tryout with the MMA and...well, you never know when those skills will come in handy."

"No kidding," Mel said, rubbing her throat.

"Are you okay? I called the cops."

"Yeah, he didn't like my last book, so he wanted a refund."

Mel tried to laugh, but her throat hurt. She took a sip of her coffee and swallowed hard past the pain. She gathered up all the photos and tucked them back into the envelope, which she put in her pocket.

“Aw, the police are here.” The bright flashing lights filled the room. “I’ll bring you another coffee. I’m sure they’ll want to talk to both of us,” the kid said, stating the obvious.

After Mel gave her statement, she’d pulled out her phone to call Jill. She’d glossed over the attempted strangling but firmly suggested they take a break for a while, at least until things cooled down and she could put some distance between Jill and her husband. Clearly, Jill disagreed, protesting vehemently. It wasn’t a request, at least not for Mel. She knew they were finished at that point, and while she loved Jill, being involved with someone who had a toxic ex was drama she didn’t need in her life at the moment. It had taken weeks for Mel to come to terms with the decision she’d made about Jill; damn, the sex had been good. If only Jill had taken a graceful exit. The flowers, the cards, a plane ticket to Rome...all ways Jill thought she’d try to win Mel over. She’d even stopped by the coffeehouse to catch Mel when she, too, discovered her sanctuary, but after the incident with Jill’s husband, Mel hired a protection detail for a couple of weeks. They had kept Jill at bay and then immediately recommended a change to her routine, which meant, unfortunately, that the coffee shop was out as a second office and she’d have to read her newspaper elsewhere.

Suddenly, the name hit her. Pilar Stein was a Pulitzer-winning reporter.

Max leaned against Mel and rested his head on her thigh. “So, what is a reporter of her stature doing searching me out? Huh, Max?” She stroked his head as he looked up at her.

Now she wasn’t so sure she’d put her past behind her.

Max jumped up and licked her face and leaned against her “Huh?” she said again, running her hand down his fur and gently slapping his hind quarter. “Sometimes the shit you bury in your past doesn’t stay buried. It’s not like those bones you take to the backyard, buddy. Yes, she’s attractive, but she’s trouble, Max. Trust me, she’s up to no good.”

She’d run to the solace of her hometown, trading the big city for the gentle rolling hills of her childhood. The laid-back country life had always called to her, and when her mother was alive it was where she came when she needed someone to talk to, so it always held a special place in her heart. While others felt like they could never go home, for her home was and would also be here. God, how she wished she could pick up the phone and talk to her mom just one more time. She fought back the urge to cry for what she’d lost when her mother died. Then something hit her: maybe she was here for a different reason.

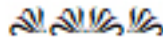
“Shit.”

She thought about giving her dad a call and a heads-up, then quickly dismissed the idea.

“I don’t owe him shit,” she said, burying her head against Max’s. “Let him deal with the nosy reporter on his own.”

It was just a hunch, but her suspicions weren’t usually wrong.

“Let’s go get a burger and think about this, buddy.” She cranked on the wheel and guided the old pickup back onto the road to town. She needed to think about this new development. Somehow she knew that the reporter was out for a big story and her life was just about to get interesting.



An hour later, George’s had proven to be a bust. His usual cook was replaced with some kid who didn’t seem to know how a burger should be cooked. The almost fresh onions were soft and buttery, and the bun had scorch marks on it that would make her dad proud, but the patty...well his lack of years showed in the near raw meat staring back at her. She gave the inedible burger to Max instead.

“The burnt parts are good for your teeth,” her dad had said when she complained about the constantly charred offerings he laid on her plate as a kid. While some fathers had a knack for grilling, hers...well, he just couldn’t get it down, even when she’d remodeled his whole backyard with a grilling island his buddies drooled over.

Her new water tank rattled between the stacks of lumber, chicken feed, and a bale of hay.

“It better not bust,” she said, looking over at Max, ruffling the fur on his head. All she wanted was a hot shower, sleep, and some quiet time, but that would have to wait until after she sorted out the tire situation. At least she knew Mike would put her first in line at the garage—one of the perks of small-town living. She didn’t regret tossing away all the big city offered—the vestiges of the corner coffee shops, fancy restaurants, bumper-to-bumper traffic, all replaced for the simple life. She knew she would have traded it all in eventually, but the potential of a nasty scandal and bad breakup just made it happen sooner than expected. Now, she worried her past was revisiting her with the arrival of the woman in the Mercedes.

Chapter Two

“Well, he was no help.” Pilar stared in her rearview mirror as the truck pulled farther away. She pulled off the road and looked at the map laid out on the seat. She twisted this way and that. How could she have found herself so hopelessly lost? “Cute dog, though.”

She picked up the folder she’d created on Melanie Crenshaw.

“I have a fucking Pulitzer. What the hell am I doing in the middle of nowhere trying to track down someone who ditched life for the snail’s pace of this cow town?”

She picked up the few photos she’d been able to find of the woman. Attractive, yet something in her eyes were haunting Pilar. The photos were years old, and the most recent one was a publicity shot for one of her earlier novels. They were all she could find on short notice. The woman avoided the press like bats avoid the sun. She thumbed through the press clippings, all without a current photo, the bulk of the articles about her books being optioned for a series of movies. It was the best her editor could do as she tossed the job on Pilar’s desk. The gossip around her sudden departure from her home in the city had been interesting and challenging enough for Magdalena to toss it Pilar’s way. Maybe it was her tenacity that convinced her? Then again, maybe it was Pilar’s constant hounding that had finally broken down her editor’s resolve. Magdalena had expressed her doubts about Pilar’s ability to deliver on this story, and now Pilar was regretting being so pushy.

Rumors—whispers, really—of lesbianism, plagiarism, and every other ism out there swirled around the author. None of it came from credible sources, so until she had proof she would just have to try to find it for herself. Besides, what was the big deal if the woman was gay? Hadn’t the world moved past the issue? Obviously not, if Melanie Crenshaw had taken to hiding in her hometown. Or could it be that her family had drawn her back?

Pilar picked up the photo of Lauden Crenshaw, another author who suddenly fell off the face of the earth about a decade back and just happened to be the father of one Melanie Crenshaw. A skyrocketing career that came to a screeching halt. Maybe it was a familial thing. Success wasn’t for everyone, and some lost their way when the limelight and money started rolling in. Lauden had a fatherly look to him and yet he was as elusive as his daughter. Her phone calls to him had gone unanswered, not surprisingly. His fellow authors though didn’t have the same problem talking about Lauden. A mix of jealousy and resentment were evident with everyone she’d talked to about the man. And they said journalism could be a vicious career choice.

Pilar shook her head in frustration. She should be covering the latest Washington scandal. With a new crop of politicians taking office, there was no shortage of intriguing stories to pick from. The Pulitzer should have opened a bunch of doors for her—and it had. But the lasting trauma from the very story that had garnered the top accolade just wouldn’t let her go. She’d tried talk therapy, support groups, even hypnosis, but no remedy for the next two years had freed her of her overwhelming PTSD and anxiety. And fear was the number one enemy of any investigative reporter worth their salt.

Pilar finally hit on something that worked—a therapist she liked and self-defense training workouts several times a week. Bolstered by a new sense of strength and self-confidence, she’d been picking up the pieces, taking every minor freelance piece that came her way just to keep her head in the game. Certainly, with enough puff pieces under her belt, she’d make herself ready for a real story. Someday.

The *Literary Times* was one step closer to the hard-hitting investigative stories she’d churned out in the runup to the Pulitzer. It wasn’t the *New York Times*—yet—but it was what she could handle at the

moment and had way more legitimacy than a tabloid or online “entertainment news” outlet. Besides, Magdalena, the editor that shepherded the Pulitzer-winning article, had moved over to the *Literary Times* and had done Pilar a favor by putting her on stories at all. So, she’d pay her dues tracking down a reclusive woman who definitely didn’t want to be found, and use her charm to tease out exclusive information for the in-depth profile her editor wanted. If she could just catch a break...the town was too small for nobody to know nothing about nothing. She was confident that her reporter’s nose could sniff out the answer eventually. There was too much riding on this story for her, and she would be damned if Melanie Crenshaw would evade her.

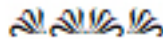
Pilar looked at Melanie’s press photos again. She was definitely attractive and had that kind of guess-my-orientation look about her. The eyes, though, they...well, they seemed so...what was the word she was looking for?

Sad.

The polar opposite of the photo of her father. His beaming, cat-who-ate-the-canary smile gave him a sort of arrogant air. He was definitely someone who seemed to enjoy the spotlight if his press photo was any indication of the type of man he was. So why did Melanie Crenshaw seem so lost? Yep, two total opposites, yet from the same tree. The more she wondered the more she wanted to get to the bottom of why Melanie had gone off the social and media grid, so to speak.

“Back to town, I guess.” Tossing the folder on the seat, she tried to refold the useless paper guide she’d picked up at the gas station when she realized she had no cell service and the GPS app stopped working. She tossed the redneck origami in the seat behind her. Tapping her phone again, she strained to look at her destination on the map app, but it was useless. It was as if all the roads ended somewhere, just not the road she was looking for.

“Of course, GPS isn’t working out here in hell’s playground.” She shaded her eyes and looked around the vast expanse of wide-open spaces. The only living things were the black specks that moved every once in a while and dotted the gently rolling hills studded with trees. She’d figured out they were cows—at least she thought they were cows. She’d passed a large, foul-smelling farm getting off the highway. The beasts were packed in pens and the odor almost made her vomit. Seeing a group of men herding the bovines, she couldn’t believe that people lived and worked around that smell twenty-four hours a day, every day.



Pilar circled back into the driveway of the burger joint. God, all she wanted was a diet soda and air conditioning.

George’s Drive-In was plastered across a sign that had probably seen its heyday in the fifties.

Walking inside, Pilar felt like she’d stepped back a few decades and into a world that looked more like a car-hop movie set in the 1950s. She stepped around the hanging fly strip, coated in flies. The smell of bacon lingered in the air, making her hungry. A burger would be nice right about now. A protein bar was breakfast, and it hadn’t lasted long this morning.

Squinting at the menu, she could make out a loaded burger and fries. “Four fifty,” she muttered.

“Yep, soda’s extra. No refills, but iced tea is all you can drink,” a rotund man shouted from behind the opening to the kitchen. “Margie, get your ass out here. You gotta customer.”

Silence.

“Must be on a smoke break.” He walked around from the kitchen, wiping his hands on his stained apron. “What can I get ya?”

“Are you George?”

“I am.” George rubbed the scruff on his chin with the handle of the spatula.

“Hey, you wouldn’t happen to know Melanie Crenshaw, would you?”

“Ol’ Mel? Sure, you just missed her.”

“Are you kidding?” Pilar looked out into the parking lot. “Christ, just my luck. What kinda car is she driving?” Maybe Pilar passed her leaving.

“No car. Pickup. Old Ford. Said something about needing to get tires on it. Got a flat today.”

“No shit?” She couldn’t believe she’d just been talking to the one person who could’ve led her to Mel Crenshaw: Mel Crenshaw herself.

“Yep, you a friend of Mel’s?”

“Sorta.”

“Do you want to order?”

Pilar looked at the menu. She knew she shouldn’t, but what the hell. She’d do extra Zumba next week.

Chapter Three

The auto shop was a small but busy place.. Cars might have been its meat and potatoes, but that didn't stop people from bringing in their mowers, tractors, weed whackers, and leaf blowers. If it had an engine in it, it came to Mike's. In a small town, if your engine started to go there weren't many places to turn to, especially when mechanics were in short supply, opting for better paying jobs in the city.

So, Mike made sure to get his hands in a bit of everything.

Right now, his hands were occupied with a thin paper cup filled with steaming, dark roast coffee. It smelled rank and bitter, too strong for Mel's tastes, but she took one when he offered it up to her all the same. It never paid to be rude to the person who was fixing your car.

Mike said, "Been a while since you've been in here."

"I know. Been a while since I needed something fixed." Mel patted Max's head as he leaned against her leg.

"Can't stop by to chat anymore?" Mike knelt down and ruffled Max's fur. "You need to bring Mommy to the shop more often, Max."

Max leaned into the rough petting, his tongue hanging out at all the attention.

Traitor. Mel thought, watching her dog bond with Mike.

"You know it's not like that, Mike."

"Sure, sure, it's never like that. Always got a ton of good reasons why you don't want to see me." His off-center grin was kind and sincere. He was quite a few years older than Mel, with a crooked nose that had been broken a few times too many. "You ever think that maybe it would get you a discount if you brought me coffee once in a while?"

Mel held up her paper cup. "Is that you admitting that this is bad?"

"No." Mike snorted. "That there is the best damn coffee in the county. It can't be beat by no other brew. I was just using it as an example. Stopping by for more than tires occasionally might be nice." She'd known Mike had a crush on her for a while. He'd made a trip out to the farm, on the guise of lending a hand, when he found out her tractor had blown a tire.

"I know, I know," relented Mel. She really hadn't been a good friend or neighbor lately. She ran a hand through her hair, pushing it back out of her face. "I've just been busy. It's no excuse, but with that winter storm about to come in..."

Mike gave a low whistle through his teeth. "All right, I'll let you off the hook with that one. It is looking to be a bit of a doozy. Your first winter back in town, and you're about to get snowed in good. That's got to be something."

"It's a little nerve-racking," admitted Mel. "I'm still trying to get used to being back here, you know? And the farm...it's got a lot of work to be done on it still. The winter's going to be a beast to get through."

"But you'll be here for the holidays. That's something."

"It sure is." Mel wasn't sure if it was a good something yet or a bad something, but she could agree that it was something. She asked, "Got any plans for the holiday, Mike?"

Mike gave her a long, amiable smile. He stepped around the side of the counter and over an empty gasoline tin that had been knocked onto its side. The shop itself was small, the main entrance connecting the office to the shop portion. There was a single door leading into the checkout bay, and a rolling tin door that led into the garage. Another door connected the two.

Mike led her over to one of the pictures hanging on the garage wall. He tapped it with his finger. "I'm taking the boys out to the cabin."

"The boys" were Mike's best friends, Theo and George. They had all been held back the same year in high school and bonded over a hatred for sitting still in class and a love of hunting. Last Mel heard, Theo was actually out of town at the moment, chasing after some sweetheart of his.

Surprised, she asked, "Theo's coming back?"

"Comes back every winter," Mike said. "Wouldn't miss being home for the holidays." He caught himself, adding on, "Just the way he is. Likes me taking him to the cabin too much for that."

It only stung a bit. People tried not to give Mel too much flack for having been gone so long. She came back when it was important, even if it was a little too late. "I think that sounds like fun. What's the backup plan?"

"Backup plan?"

"You know. In case the weather gets too bad."

Mike laughed. "We're counting on the weather being bad. The goal is to get ourselves snowed into that cabin, so we've got an excuse to stay longer for the weekend. It's going to be the three of us, a deck of cards, and—"

"All the beer you can drink?"

"All the beer we can drink. Well, maybe not. Depends. Theo's on-again, off-again sober. If he's not drinking right now, we won't bring it along." Mike downed half his coffee and then made a face. "But it'll be good either way. It's less about getting shit-faced and more about getting to catch up, you know?"

"Yeah, I've sure enjoyed that about being home. I'll say that much. I wanted to swing by Jenna's place before winter hit, but—"

"You can always join us out at the cabin if you want. It'll be fun. Just like old times." Mike offered her a wide grin. Yep, he was sweet on her, and it was making her uncomfortable. It hadn't been a secret that she was gay, but it wasn't front page news, at least not here.

"Thanks, Mike. I promised my dad that I'd go out and see him and spend the holidays with him." It wasn't strictly true, but she had every intention to call her father at some point. "Ever since my mom...well, I just figured it might be nice if I showed up for once."

He bumped her shoulder against his and nodded. "I get it. No worries, maybe next time."

She felt like she'd dodged a bullet, for now. "Next time, for sure." It wasn't a promise she'd keep, and she hoped by then he'd get the hint.

"Jenna will probably have already left by now, I reckon. I don't get that having split houses thing."

"I guess when you can afford it, you use it," Mel said with a shrug. She didn't want to acknowledge she was in the same boat, but she could understand Jenna wanting to get away from the gossip incubator that sometimes felt like a prison more than a refuge. Jenna was an old friend, but not the best. She had made it big about ten years back when stock trading changed and everyone with a computer could be a day trader, and she'd been acting like she owned the Ritz ever since.

Her farm was the one farthest at the edge of town, a good drive no matter what, with about seven hundred acres. Inherited—like a lot of the places in the area—it had been in Jenna's family for almost five generations now.

Mike asked, "Speaking of houses, how's yours coming along?"

"Oh, you know," Mel said noncommittally.

Mike snorted. "That don't tell me nothing. And I'm not looking for Miss Perfection here either. I know you've got high standards. I'm talking about practical."

“I still don’t have the hot water heater fixed.”

“But those fuses?”

“I got them all switched out and replaced the box. Got the outlet fixed too.”

“That’s good,” Mike said. “It’s a good start. You can’t move into a place like that and expect it to be ready and raring to go in a few months’ time. It’s not bad. I’ve driven by it a few times. Not recently, mind you, but back while it was sitting empty. Seems like the foundation is still good on it, and the porch ain’t rotted through.”

Mel had made her fair share of trips back home for months looking for the perfect ranch to buy. When the O’Donnell ranch came up for sale, she’d driven back four separate times to check things out. If she were honest with herself, the prospect of moving back home was like snuggling down in that warm comfy bed after a long day at work, curling up under the family quilt and burying your head underneath to avoid the mythical monster that lived under the bed. She chuckled at the simile. Was her dad the beast and she had to face him, or was she romanticizing her childhood town? It didn’t matter, she missed the small-town feel, the opportunity to reconnect with friends she’d left behind, and the opportunity to put down roots someplace that held memories of her mother. God how she missed her mom, and she hoped moving back would give her a bit of peace mentally and spiritually. She’d run away as soon as her mom died and hadn’t looked back, but now she felt an urgency to settle things with her family. She wasn’t holding her breath that her father would be open to that, the selfish prick. Still, he was family, and she would do her part even if he wouldn’t.

“Yeah, well, I’ve only really been back for a month, but I’m sure I can get it in shape before winter sets in. I’ve missed this place, and I’m glad to be home.” Mel leaned against her truck. “Front porch isn’t bad, but there’s rot on the back porch. So, I’ve got a call in to Andy to help me around the place, so things should move quicker with help. Lumber in the back of the truck is for the back stairs.”

“Back porch doesn’t matter half as much though, does it? No one’s going to be standing around on the back porch. The front is the heart of the house.”

“I thought those were the windows?”

Mike guffawed and slapped at his thigh like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. He shook his head, taking a moment to get the breath back in himself before saying, “Nah. The windows are the eyes. The front porch is the heart. First thing anyone sees when they go by, and the spot that welcomes you in at the end of the day.”

“When did you get so poetic?”

Mike shrugged. “I’ve been trying a few new things.”

“What, really?”

“My hands are getting bad on me. I won’t be able to do this job forever. Besides, I think it’s time to work smarter, not harder. I ain’t ready for retirement, but if you can’t hold a wrench and crank down on an engine...well, I don’t want that on my conscience. Besides, I know the missus is ready to have me underfoot every day.” Mike flexed his hands, the gnarled fingers not straightening. A shop accident in high school had almost crushed his hands completely. That was the end of the mechanics program and the start of the long, drawn-out lawsuit his parents had filed against the school district. “Besides, Leo’s thinking about moving outta town once he’s done with high school.”

Leo was one of the local kids. He was a good guy, and he’d been working around the shop since he was twelve. Sweeping and cleanup work to begin with, but he’d been learning a thing or two about the mechanical end of things lately. It was always sad to see when someone was moving on. Mel wondered sometimes if that’s how people felt when she moved away.

It was something of a betrayal to everyone here, and if she dwelled too much, it left a nasty taste in her mouth. She quickly asked, “What’s he moving on for?”

“Trucker work, or maybe join the Army. He wants to drive. Getting ready to apply for the right license and all. Won’t be able to get his own rig right away, but he knows someone that’s looking for a riding partner. Thinks it will help put more food on the table than the work he does here. Don’t blame him, mind you. We don’t get the same sort of work around here that we used to. Just seems like I’ll need to find someone else to take over or maybe I’ll just sell the shop. He tells me the Army offers him some of the same opportunities, a steady paycheck, with benefits. I’m trying to talk him into staying, but he’s gonna be a man pretty soon, so he’ll do his own thing. If he leaves, I won’t have no one to help with the heavy lifting, so…”

Clearly, he was either going to have to find another young kid looking for a skill, or shut down the shop. People talked about houses and humans passing away in old towns, but it was businesses that died the most. Their owners got old and ended up with no kids who wanted to take on the business afterward. The main street in town was practically a graveyard at this point.

Mel was pretty sure that the only two places in town that could never go out would be the grocers and the feed store. Business never faltered at those places, even in the hard times, like in the dead of a winter. People and animals alike always needed to eat.

“I bet you’ll find someone else,” Mel said. “Kids around here are always looking for work.”

“Sure, but I need someone with a good head on their shoulders. I can’t have any meathead thinking they can come in here, throw around a few tools, and walk away on top. It’s rough trade work.” That’s how most country folk viewed things like mechanics and electric work. You had to apprentice under someone first, or there was no point wasting the money to hire you.

Mel asked, “Didn’t Dodie have a kid that was interested in cars?”

“Who, Shelby?” Mike hummed. “I haven’t spoken to Dodie in ages. I don’t know if her girl is still looking for something.”

“Might be worth a try.” Mel had long suspected the girl might be family, but you didn’t out someone unless they came to you and told you themselves. People were really cautious about those kinds of assumptions, except for the hen parties where gossip and innuendo passed for entertainment, a currency almost better than money in a remote town.

“Might be,” Mike replied. “And you changed the subject. We aren’t talking about the garage. We’re talking about the house. Got the fuses taken care of. Got plans for the socket. What are you going to do about that water tank, Mel? You can’t leave it sitting around broke all winter. We’ll end up pulling you frozen from the house come the end of the storm season.”

“I’m working on it. I got a new one in the back of the truck right now, see? So, don’t worry, it’s all good.”

“Seems more like you’re putting off working on it, if you ask me. Should’ve been the first thing that you tore apart,” Mike said. “Everything comes after the hot water and heat, you should know that. Especially with this storm getting ready to come in. You don’t want to end up stuck cold all winter.”

Mel nodded. She was about to respond when she heard the sound of tires on the loose gravel outside. She looked out through the garage door, and her heart skipped a beat when she saw the reporter’s car. Without thinking about how it would look, she charged forward, grabbing onto the rolling metal door and slamming it down.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Heading out,” Mel said. “If someone comes in here asking for me, tell them I’ve hitched a ride back to the farm.”

Baffled, Mike asked, “What are you going on about?”

“Just do it, Mike, please?” She gave him a wide-eyed stare.

“All right, all right, but you’re going to explain this later.”

Mel threw her arms around him in a hug. “You’re the best.”

She ducked into the office just as someone knocked on the rolling door. Mel closed her eyes, waiting until she heard the metal door rattle up.

This was the perfect time for Mel to make her escape and dodge Pilar Stein, quietly exiting out the back. Mel thought about walking back to the ranch but decided that the best change of plans would be to go hide out at the diner for a while and come back to the garage later to pick up her truck. It wouldn’t take Mike more than an hour to get the tires all changed out. The trick would be biding enough time until Pilar had left.

Mel started the walk back into town.

“Come on, Max. Let’s go get an edible burger this time. What do you say, buddy? Hmm?”

She didn’t want to go home. She didn’t want to deal with whatever mess Pilar Stein was trying to bring into her life. The thing was, Mel had enough on her plate. Life had gotten wild on her, and it had gotten wild on her fast. She didn’t want to spend her days playing hide-and-seek with some reporter that was shoving her nose where it didn’t belong.

At the beginning of her career, her agent had given Mel “the talk” the minute the woman found out Mel was a lesbian. She explained that Mel being out would dilute her success and take the focus off her writing.

Dilute?

What was that?

According to her agent, she needed to keep her personal life just that: personal. The mystery genre was a male-dominated category, and women had a hard enough time breaking through the paper ceiling. Add homophobia to that and Mel could practically kiss her career goodbye. Famous father or not, it wasn’t a risk her agent was willing to take. At least in the beginning. Once Mel made a name for herself and had a few successful books under her belt, then all bets were off. Besides, her agent said, she didn’t want Mel on the book circuit only being asked questions about her latest girlfriend or talking about the most recent vacation photos showing Mel canoodling. *Salacious* was being nice when it came to terms her agent used. *Pervert*, *sick*, and every other word that had been used to describe women who loved other women were thrown about in that meeting. Mel felt disgusted by the time it was all over, and she seriously questioned her place in the mystery world.

But it was her calling. For as long as she could remember, being a writer was all she wanted in life. Her mother supported and encouraged Mel to pick up a pen and create the worlds she wanted to live in. Her agent had told her that if she wanted a shot at a book deal, she’d have to act accordingly. So, she’d punched down that part of her life and gave up on finding love.

Well, that part didn’t last long, and now, years later, a reporter was snooping around. At some level, Mel felt betrayed. But by whom? She could guess, but Mel needed to try to stop the bleeding and keep her personal life personal. Her family, mainly her father, had no clue about her orientation. She knew how he felt about the LGBT community from his many diatribes at the supper table when they were kids. She’d sworn her mother to secrecy when her mom found out after she walked in on her and her best friend kissing.

Mel, the successful mystery author, didn’t need to explain how she broke up the relationship of a top forensic scientist and her husband, or how she’d left her own girlfriend for said scientist, only to have it all fall to shit.

And that was clearly what was happening. Which was why she was here, back at home, in a town where people respected her privacy but never let her forget that they’d had a hand in growing her.

Mel reasoned that Pilar probably wouldn’t be willing to stick it out for more than a day or two. Judging by her car alone, Pilar wasn’t the kind of person who was used to going without luxury. And for

all that Mel loved in this town, it was not a place that was rich in luxuries; the only available lodging around wasn't named "Hotel Quick" for nothing. The town and surrounding communities weren't rich in anything past cattle, stray cats, hens, and drinking buddies.

Everything else was hard earned and hard to get. Mel turned the corner onto the main street, the sun casting a warm glow over the little haven. She had thought that the city was the right place to hide, but when push had come to shove, the country was where Mel knew she needed to go.

The thought of Pilar bringing big-city trouble out here to her was enough to leave Mel unsettled, a heavy weight settling at the base of her gut. There was a brief passing moment where she considered doing an interview just to make the woman go away, but it was a thought that Mel quickly brushed aside.

After all, the point of coming out here was so that she didn't have to deal with her problems. She'd left them back in the city along with the baggage that came with relationships. Bad breakups—everybody had them, and she wasn't exempt from the experience. She just didn't want to talk about it, or think about it. She just wanted to be left alone to sort out her life, and her old stomping grounds, where everyone treated her like a regular person, was just the place her soul needed to do that. At least that was what she kept telling herself every night.

So, no. Mel would not be doing an interview with Pilar Stein, or anyone else, about her relationship any time in the near, or far, future. She would just sit herself down at the diner with a milkshake, some fries, and wait until the nosy woman had gone elsewhere. Mike needed time to change out the tire anyway, so Mel figured she wasn't even out a whole lot, exactly.

What better treat was there to pass the time than a hand-churned milkshake, anyway?

None, that was for sure.

Mel spied the diner at the end of the street and set off for it, periodically looking over her shoulder for the journalist. She rarely made a lot of splurges lately. Running from the bad ending with Jill, plus a house that took up a lot of her time and money since there was always something that had to be bought or replaced, had kept her mind focused and her head down. Repairs, she had learned, were not cheap to do, and there seemed to be no end to things that had to be fixed up, changed up, replaced, and otherwise adjusted. She had second thoughts every time she was at the lumber yard or the hardware store and about to dump more on the money pit in the country and the big house she owned in the city that stayed somewhat empty. When things cooled down and she was no longer a wanted woman on the "where did she go?" circuit, she'd eventually venture back to the city. Besides, her assistant Emily still lived in the house and kept her apprised of schedules, tasks from her editor and publisher, and demands from her lawyer—which seemed to be endless.

Unfortunately, Mel had to hire a team of lawyers to clean up the mess with Jill, and then there was Carrie, her ex who had made it well known in their small circle of friends that she would ruin Mel in any way she could. That was enough to get her hired pit bulls to descend on her like a ton of bricks. Suits citing slander, libel, and defamation, plus the threat of keeping her knee-deep in legal bills, had cooled her stilettos—for now. To their credit, her legal counsel had found some very naughty details in Carrie's past and threatened to go to the media with them if she followed through with her threats of going public. While prostitution wasn't as shocking today as it might have been years ago, Mel was sure it would ruin any chances of resurrecting her failing TV career.

Mel wasn't thrilled with the walk, but she figured that the exercise was good for her. She hadn't had her once-usual strawberry milkshake in a while, and it sounded perfect. Besides, the diner was full of friendly faces, and she spread the word that her truck was in the shop just on the off chance that Pilar made it this far before she left.

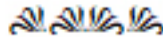
The milkshake was just as tasty as Mel remembered, and she set up near the window so she would have a clear view of the roads and sidewalk leading up to the entrance, including eyes on a content Max, who had curled up in the sun next to a bowl of water the diner had outside for their canine customers.

There was no doubt the owner, Beth, would let Mel jump out the back door if she asked, needing to make a quick exit. Beth and Mel's mother had been close friends, and she was something like an aunt to Mel after having spent so much time around her growing up.

Much to Mel's pleasure, there was no sign of Pilar, and she could sit and enjoy her milkshake. A few sideways glances at her amused her. She wasn't sure if she would ever get used to people pointing and whispering, but she did her best to look unbothered, at least. While the townsfolk generally felt that run-of-the-mill celebrity scandals weren't worth their time, they were simply tickled that their small hamlet had produced not one but two famous authors, and they absolutely took pride in that fact. They also were fiercely protective of their own, so Mel saw their tittering around her as a fair trade for them circling the wagons when outsiders came looking to make trouble.

After Mel deemed that she had loitered long enough, she made her way back to the garage to pick up her truck. No doubt Mike would have made changing her tires the priority if it meant he could get all the juicy gossip, especially after such an odd departure on Mel's end.

What was she going to tell him? Mel didn't want to spend the evening trying to rehash everything that had happened. She honestly wasn't at a point yet where she wanted to talk about it with anyone. And no offense to Mike, but a casual friend wasn't exactly who Mel wanted to be spilling her heart out to today.



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About The Author

Congrats to Isabella for winning three Indie Book awards for *Faithful Valor* and *Cigar Barons*. Isabella is an award-winning author for Sapphire Books. She lives on the central coast of California with her wife. she teaches at a local college and has three wonderful son and rides motorcycles when she's not writing or remodeling a cabin in the Sierra foothills.

Isabella has written sixteen novels and just finished, *Dusty Road Home*, a stand-alone in the strong women Series. If you want to read her current work, check out her newest release, *Blood Honor*, or *Cigar Barons*, a complete divergence from her usual romance, you can find them below or on any book vendor website.

She also writes under the nom de plume - Jett Abbott. A darker, rogue who's a motorcycle enthusiast and loves people watching.

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Check out Isabella's other books

Award winning novel - *Always Faithful* - ISBN - 978-0-982860-80-9

Major Nichol “Nic” Caldwell is the only survivor of her helicopter crash in Iraq. She is left alone to wonder why she and she alone survived. Survivor’s guilt has nothing on the young Major as she is forced to deal with the scars, both physical and mental, left from her ordeal overseas. Before the accident, she couldn’t think of doing anything else in her life.

Claire Monroe is your average military wife, with a loving husband and a little girl. She is used to the time apart from her husband. In fact, it was one of the reasons she married him. Then, one day, her life is turned upside down when she gets a visit from the Marine Corps.

Can these two women come to terms with the past and finally find happiness, or will their shared sense of honor keep them apart?

Forever Faithful - ISBN – 978-1-939062-75-8

Life is what happens when you make other plans, and Nic and Claire have just found out that life and the Marine Corps have other plans for their lives. Nic Caldwell has served her country, met the woman of her dreams, and has reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. She’s studying at one of the nation’s most prestigious military universities, setting her sights on a research position after graduation. Things couldn’t be better and then it happens; a sudden assignment to Afghanistan derails any thoughts of marriage and wedded bliss. Another combat zone, another tragedy, and Nic suddenly finds herself fighting for her life. Claire Monroe loves her new life in Monterey. She’s finally where she wants to be, getting ready to start her master’s program at the local university, watching her daughter, Grace, growing up, and getting ready to marry the love of her life. What could possibly derail a perfect life? The Marine Corps. Will Nic survive Afghanistan? Can Claire step up and be the strength in their relationship? Or will this overseas assignment and a catastrophic accident divide their once happy home?

Faithful Valor - ISBN - 978-1-948232-85-2

Sometimes danger isn’t found on a battleground—it’s sitting at your front door.

Nic Caldwell is back Stateside, working the job she was supposed to have before her most recent deployment, and living her best life at home. At least she thought she would be, except her PTSD is always in the background, dragging her back to her tour in Afghanistan. As she struggles to

control her demons privately, her public life with Claire is almost picture perfect. However, a picture can't show everything hiding just under the surface.

Claire Monroe has the love of her life back in one piece—almost. She's trying to help Nic adjust to her new normal both physically and emotionally while also going back to school and raising their daughter, Grace. With all the difficulties Nic's re-entry poses along with the new challenges of being an adult student, she wonders how she can guide them back to their old life while building a new one for herself.

Cece Ramirez has decided that the Army has served its purpose and she is ready for a new chapter in her professional and personal life. Retiring from active duty and moving on to a new role as a police officer on a college campus, she realizes that she's traded camo, discipline, and rifles for book bags, bikes, and rowdy post-adolescents. While she and the students at Cal State Monterey Bay might be the same age, their pasts are vastly different, and the transition from soldier to college cop may not be as smooth as she hopes.

When a chance encounter at a near-base shopette challenges Nic's authority and leaves her and her family in potential peril, Cece and Claire must pull together to back Nic up in peacetime, and right at home.

American Yakuza - ISBN - 978-0-9828608-3-0

Luce Potter straddles three cultures as she strives to live with the ideals of family, honor, and duty. When her grandfather passes the family business to her, Luce finds out that power, responsibility and justice come with a price. Is it a price she's willing to die for?

Brooke Erickson lives the fast-paced life of an investigative journalist living on the edge until it all comes crashing down around her one night in Europe. Stateside, Brooke learns to deal with a new reality when she goes to work at a financial magazine and finds out things aren't always as they seem.

Can two women find enough common ground for love or will their two different worlds and cultures keep them apart?

American Yakuza II - The Lies that Bind - ISBN - 978-10939062-20-8

Luce Potter runs her life and her business with an iron fist and complete control until lies and deception unravel her world. The shadow of betrayal consumes Luce, threatening to destroy the most precious thing in her life, Brooke Erickson.

Brooke Erickson finds herself on the outside of Luce's life looking in. As events spiral out of control Brooke can only watch as the woman she loves pushes her further away. Suddenly, devastated and alone, Brooke refuses to let go without an explanation.

Colby Water, a federal agent investigating the ever-elusive Luce Potter, discovers someone from her past is front and center in her investigation of the Yakuza crime leader. Before she can put the crime boss in prison, she must confront the ultimate deception in her professional life.

When worlds collide, betrayal, dishonor and death are inevitable. Can Luce and Brooke survive the explosion?

America Yakuza III- Razor's Edge - ISBN - 978-1-943353-81-1

Luce Potter lives by a code of honor. Push her and she shoves back, harder. There's only one problem: Luce has just found out that revenge is a knife that cuts both ways. Now that her lover Brooke has survived the attack on her life, Luce has only one thing on her mind, and his name is Frank. Unfortunately, someone walks into her life that she didn't see coming. Brooke Erickson has survived an attack so brutal it's left a permanent scar on her soul. All she wants to do now is go home and finish recuperating with her lover, Luce Potter, by her side. An unexpected event puts Brooke at the head of the Yakuza family. Can she command the respect necessary to lead it through the crisis? Luce and Brooke's worlds are upending. Can each do what's necessary to survive and return to a new normal

Executive Disclosure- ISBN - 978-0-9828608-3-0

When a life is threatened, it takes a special breed of person to step in front of a bullet. Chad Morgan's job has put her life on the line more times that she can count. Getting close to the client is expected; getting too close could be deadly for Chad. Reagan Reynolds wants the top job at Reynolds Holdings and knows how to play the game like "the boys." She's not above using her beauty and body as currency to get what she wants. Shocked to find out someone wants her dead, Reagan isn't thrilled at the prospect of needing protection as she tries to convince the board she's the right woman for a man's job. How far will a killer go to get what they want? Secrets and deception twist the rules of the game as a killer closes in. How far will Chad go to protect her beautiful, but challenging client?

Surviving Reagan - ISBN - 978-1-939062-38-3

Chad Caldwell has finally worked through the betrayal of her former client and lover, Reagan Reynolds. Putting the pieces of her life back in order, she finds herself on a collision course with that past when she takes on a new client, the future first lady. Unfortunately, Chad's newest job puts her in the cross-hairs of a domestic terrorist determined to release a virus that could kill thousands of women. Reagan Reynolds has paid for her sins and is ready to start a new life. Attending a business conference in Abu Dhabi gives her the opportunity to prove to her father and herself that she's worthy of a fresh start. Her past will intersect with her future at the conference when she accidentally comes face-to-face with Chad Caldwell. Time is running out. Will Reagan confront Chad? Can she convince Chad she's changed, or will death part them forever?

Broken Shield - ISBN - 978-0-982860-82-3

Tyler Jackson, former paramedic now firefighter, has seen her share of death up close. The death of her wife caused Tyler to rethink her career choices, but the death of her mother two weeks later cemented her return to the ranks of firefighter. Her path of self-destruction and womanizing is just a front to hide the heartbreak and devastation she lives with every day. Tyler's given up on finding love and having the family she's always wanted. When tragedy strikes her life for a second time she finds something she thought she lost.

Ashley Henderson loves her job. Ignoring her mother's advice, she opts for a career in law enforcement. But, Ashley hides a secret that soon turns her life upside down. Shame, guilt and fear keep Ashley from venturing forward and finding the love she so desperately craves. Her life comes crashing down around her in one swift moment forcing her to come clean about her secrets and her life.

Can two women thrust together by one traumatic event survive and find love together, or will their past force them apart?

The Gate - ISBN - 978-1-943353-93-4

Valhalla is for warriors that die in battle. What of those who don't have a hero's death? Where do they go? The inter-world is in chaos and has become the heart of the battleground in the war between Paladins and Gatekeepers. Harley doesn't know it yet, but she's at ground zero. A night of drinking, to forget a cheating girlfriend, is about to change her life forever. A birthmark—or a birthright—sets her on a direct path to a woman who claims to have known her for centuries. Not ready to accept her Paladin mantle, she needs proof—and that proof is out to destroy her. A protector by birth, Dawn was bred to preserve the delicate cycle of life and death. Protecting a Paladin is to be mated for eternity, usually without the sex, but Harley's allure is universally compelling. Harley's rise in status to The Chosen complicates things further as Dawn finds herself

fighting for her own heart, as well as battling her biggest nemesis and brother, Lucius. Lucius, lord of the Gatekeepers, is out to kill souls moving to their next life. He wants Harley in his corner and he isn't about to let a little sibling rivalry stand in the way, no matter what it takes. Harley find herself caught up in Lucius's tempting promise of power, but cannot shake the soul-tugging love she feels with Dawn. Will Dawn convince Harley in time to embrace her Paladin destiny and save the souls looking for their gate, or will Lucius be able to sway Harley to throw in with the Gatekeepers?

Twisted Deception - ISBN - 978-1-939062-47-5

There are two types of people who can't look you in the eyes: someone trying to hide a lie and someone trying to hide their love.

Addie Blake's life isn't black and white--more like a series of short bursts of color that sustain her until the next eruption. She isn't a ladder-climber in the corporate world. Instead, she works long hours at the office and even at home, something her mechanic girlfriend, Drake Hogan, can't stand. If Addie can't focus on Drake, then Drake finds arm candy that will. After a long week of late nights and a series of text-messaged demands, each one a bigger bomb than the last, Addie has had enough of her Motor Girl.

Greyson Hollister inhabits a world where everything is either black and white, or money green. She's a polished, certified workaholic. As head of Integrated Financial, she has built the ladder others want to climb. Now she intends to attend a business mixer to confront a rumormonger and kill merger rumors involving her company.

Detective Nancy Hill, the lead detective on the Elevator Rapist task force, has just been called in to investigate an attack at Integrated Financial. She can't quite put her finger on it, but something doesn't add up with this latest assault, and Greyson Hollister isn't exactly lending a helping hand.

A storm's brewing on the horizon. Can Addie and Greyson weather it, or will it blow them over?

Cigar Barons: Blood isn't thicker than water - it's war! - ISBN - 978-1-948232-83-8

Legends aren't built overnight. In fact, they take decades of hard work, long days, and selfless sacrifice—if one is lucky. Huerta Cigars is a result of the combined passion of patriarch Alejandro Huerta, who emigrated from pre-Castro Cuba to Nicaragua, and his sons Roberto and Manuel. Their unwavering dedication to their dream of producing the best cigars made for a success. Upon Alejandro's passing he left the cigar empire to his only daughter, Sofia, who took over the family business.

Sofia Huerta is Don Roberto's daughter, and she is making a name for herself with her own line of fine, boutique cigars. One late night phone call will change Sofia's life forever. Rushing to Nicaragua from San Francisco, her only hope is that it isn't too late to save her father.

Roberto Huerta, Jr. might be a Huerta in name, but his womanizing, drinking, and carefree lifestyle have kept him at arm's length from his father. RJ think's his father's freak accident will leave him as the rightful heir of the family empire. He couldn't have been more wrong.

A turn of events will pit brother against sister as they fight for control of the Huerta empire. Sometimes secrets and lies aren't the only thing living in the closet, and there is only one Huerta that can continue the family legacy of excellence in this romantic mystery with a twist.

In Cigar Barons, blood isn't thicker than water—it's war.

Writing as Jett Abbott

Scarlet Masquerade - ISBN - 978-0-982860-81-6

What do you say to the woman you thought died over a century ago? Will time heal all wounds or does it just allow them to fester and grow? A.J. Locke has lived over two centuries and works like a demon, both figuratively and literally. As the owner of a successful pharmaceutical company that specializes in blood research, she has changed the way she can live her life. Wanting for nothing, she has smartly compartmentalized her life so that when she needs to, she can pick up and start all over again, which happens every twenty years or so. Love is not an emotion A.J. spends much time on. Since losing the love of her life to the plague one hundred fifty years ago, she vowed to never travel down that road again. That isn't to say she doesn't have women when she wants them, she just wants them on her terms and that doesn't involve a long term commitment.

A.J.'s cool veneer is peeled back when she sees the love of her life in a lesbian bar, in the same town, in the same day and time in which she lives. Is her mind playing tricks on her? If not, how did Clarissa survive the plague when she had made A.J. promise never to change her?

Clarissa Graham is a university professor who has lived an obscure life teaching English literature. She has made it a point to stay off the radar and never become involved with anything that resembles her past life. Every once in a while Clarissa has an itch that needs to be scratched, so she finds an out of the way location to scratch it. She keeps her personal life separate from her professional one, and in doing so she is able to keep her secrets to herself. Suddenly, her life is turned upside down when someone tries to kill her. She finds herself in the middle of an assassination plot with no idea who wants her dead.

Scarlet Assassin - ISBN - 978-1-939062-36-9

Selene Hightower is a killer for hire. A vampire who walks in both the light and the darkness, but lately darkness has a stronger pull. Her unfinished business could cost her the ability to live in the light, throwing her permanently back into the black ink of evil.

Doctor Francesca Swartz led a boring life filled with test tubes, blood trials, and work. One exploratory night, in a world of leather and torture, she is intrigued by a dark and solitary soul. She surrenders to temptation and the desire to experience something new, only to discover that it might alter her life forever.

Will Selene allow the light to win over the darkness threatening the edges of her life? Two women wonder if they can co-exist despite vast differences, as worlds collide and threaten to destroy any hope of happiness. Who will win?