

John and AJ

By Kate Simon

John trotted up to the Huachuca Inn with Harley and tied him off on the post. He made sure there was enough water for him and he was positioned out of the sun until he got some dinner. Normally he'd be patrolling in his squad car but checking out the back areas of the county was easier with Harley. It was also just plain fun. He didn't get to ride Harley as often as he liked. Harley liked it too, running full out along desert trails made them both happy.

He walked into the Inn and waved to Cassie behind the bar. "Hey Cass. Could you send Cody to see to Harley while I grab some lunch?"

"Sure thing John. You want the regular?"

"Thanks Cass." He took a seat at the bar and noticed the blonde two stools down. Well, how could he not. Her long, blonde hair was pulled tight and high into a ponytail. She was wearing nicely tight jeans and a flannel shirt over a plain blue t shirt. And sneakers, nothing says Yankee than someone wearing sneakers in the desert. He estimated she was in her mid forties. She was definitely new in town because he'd didn't know her and he knew everyone. He slid down next to the blonde, smiled. "Hello Ma'am. You new to town?"

The blonde turned her head away from a book she was reading and John's breath caught. Her flashing blues eyes were laughing at him. So was the rest of her. "Does that line work for you often?"

"No line. I just know everyone in town and I don't know you. Therefore you're new."

"How do you know I'm not a tourist?"

"Huachuca doesn't attract a lot of tourists. You don't have the anxious look of someone whose car has broken down. You're very relaxed while you're reading. And you're a Yankee."

"You could tell that from my accent."

"Sneakers."

“Excuse me?”

“This is the Arizona desert. You never know when you’re going to come up on a snake or scorpion.” He was surprised when she didn’t look panicked. Most people’s automatic response was to look down at their feet.

“Noted.” She looked him up and down.

A young boy came up to John. “Harley’s okay. He’s watered and he should be fine while you’re eating.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a five dollar bill. “Thanks, Cody.”

“No problem.”

John looked back at the woman to see a stunned expression. “Did you leave your dog in the car?”

“Of course not. Harley’s my horse. He’s tied on the side of the building where there’s overhang and water trough for customer’s riding up on their horses. Cody tends to them while we eat.”

The bartender brought the woman a burger, fries and a shot of Jack. She also brought John his usual, also a burger and fries. She placed a club soda in front of him. “Thanks Cass.”

The woman looked at him sipping his club soda. “You a friend of Bill’s?”

“Why do you ask?”

She touched the brim of his hat. “You’re a cowboy and you’ve come into a cowboy bar for a meal and didn’t have a beer or a whiskey.”

John smiled. “No. It’s just that with my job I’m on call twenty four seven, so I find it easier not to drink at all.”

“Doctor?”

John laughed and pulled back his jacket, revealing a gold star. He extended his hand. “John Carson. Sheriff of Cochise County.”

“Sheriff, huh?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Well, we’d have met sooner or later.”

John smiled. “Why, are you a notorious bad guy?” The woman smiled and reached into her jacket. She flipped open a wallet, revealing an ID and a badge. “Major AJ Cooper, United States Army Military Police.”

“I’m the new commander of the MP unit out at Fort Huachuca. And I rarely get called out off hours.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Major.”

“We both appear to be off duty so you can call me AJ.”

“What does the AJ stand for?”

“Oh I don’t know you well enough for that.” she smiled. “And the reason I wear sneakers on my day off is I wear combat boots five days a week.”

John smiled. “Noted.”

AJ walked into her office and set up the coffee. She was always at least fifteen minutes early. She felt as the commander of the unit it was up to her set a standard. Corporal Johnson came in to office on time, but just.

She sat down at her desk and reviewed some the newer reports. Drunk and Disorderly, malicious mischief, a couple of DUI's. Fort Huachuca was generally a quiet outpost. Her biggest problem was soldiers going to Mexico on their time off and coming back late and hung over.

It was always tough with a new unit commander. The staff had to get used to her and she had to get used to them. She'd only been assigned to Huachuca the last few weeks. This was her terminal assignment. One more year and she'd retire. She thought she get an embassy assignment or at least a bigger assignment but then there was the incident.

A first lieutenant, John Thomas, in her last post had a taste for drinking and beating up his wife, Kathy. He also had a father who was a brigadier general. She'd been forced to drop the drunk and disorderly charges the first time when the brigadier made a call to her commander. She would have gone ahead and press charges for battery but the wife was too afraid. She'd gotten Kathy aside and explained her bruised arm might not seem like a big deal now, but her husband would only escalate his violence. She still refused so AJ did the only thing she could. She gave her a card and told her to call her if she needed assistance. One month later she got a late night call from Kathy. She was in the post hospital with a broken arm and a face so battered she hardly recognized her. The first thing she did was assign a guard to her room. The only people allowed to see her were medical personnel.

"Their going to take my kids," she whispered.

"Who's taking your kids, Kathy?" asked AJ.

"The General and his wife. He called. He says I'm unfit."

AJ had been following up on Kathy quietly. She seemed to be a devoted mother who did the PTA and went to church on Sundays. She couldn't find anyone who said a

bad thing about her. The bottom line was Kathy Thomas lived for her kids. “Do you have anyone to take care of them?”

“My mother is in New Jersey and she’s on her way but I’m afraid the General will get them first.”

“Where are they now?”

“With my neighbor, Karen Watkins.”

“I know someone who deals with these situations. It’s a shelter where the kids would be safe until your Mom gets here. It’s off post and your father in law would have no authority there. Would you give me permission to move the kids?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Okay, we’ll call Karen and asked her to pack some things for the kids. How long before your Mom gets her?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“When we call Karen you can talk to your kids and explain things.”

“Where’s John?”

“He’s in the stockade and he will stay there so long as you press charges.”

“My son tried to stop him and he pushed him down. He’s going to hurt them too.”

“I give you my word. Nobody’s going to get to your kids.”

A tear slipped out of her swollen eye. “Thank you.”

When the brigadier and her commander found out she’d taken the kids off post and she refused to drop the charges the shit hit the fan.

“It was a disagreement between spouses. It happens all the time,” said the brigadier.

“Disagreement?” AJ slapped the file on her commander’s and tossed the pictures at the man. Kathy’s face was bloodied and swollen. “After he did this, he raped her.”

“It’s not rape when you’re married,” the man said. He looked at her commander. “George, you can’t let this stand. You’ll destroy his career.”

AJ looked at her commander. She watched as he flipped through her file. He finally closed the file and looked at his old friend. “You shouldn’t be worried about his career. You should be worried about how many years he’s going to do. You should get him a good lawyer.”

The brigadier stood red faced. “You’ll both regret this.”

After he slammed the door behind him she turned back to her commander. “Thank you for having my back, Commander.”

“Don’t thank me yet. He still has enough pull to make life rough for both of us.”

AJ picked up her file. “It won’t be as rough as Kathy Thomas and her kids have had it.”

“We should probably talk about you taking those kids off post.”

“I was moving army dependents at the request of their custodial parent.”

“Yeah, I guess that’ll work.” He signed and leaned back in his chair “Jesus, sometimes this job sucks.”

“Copy that.”

Six months later her Commander retired and she’d been passed over for promotion to Colonel and transferred to Ft. Huachuca. Once she been passed over she new it was time to get out. AJ took a sip of her coffee and smiled. This assignment may be the hind end of nowhere but John Thomas was into year two of a twenty year sentence.

Corporal Johnson came in the office and set down his things. “Good Morning, Major.”

“Good morning, Corporal. How was your weekend?”

“Okay, same as always. Beer and Netflix. There is nothing to do in this town.” He walked into her office and handed her a report. She did a quick look up and down. His uniform was in order, his boots were properly shined but something caught her attention.

“Corporal, let me see your sidearm.”

“Ma’am?”

She extended her hand. “Your sidearm, Corporal.” He pulled his sidearm out of it’s holster and handed it to her. She quickly disassembled the weapon and her suspicions were confirmed. “Corporal, when was the last time you cleaned this weapon?”

“Well, it was...I was...”

“You don’t remember.”

“No, Ma’am.”

“If you were called upon to fire this weapon, it could misfire. It could kill you, or worse kill one of our unit. Or me.”

“Ma’am, you haven’t been here that long but this place is the hind end of nowhere. Nothing ever happens here.”

“Corporal, this may be the hind end of nowhere but your government assigned you here for a reason. Your duty is to be ready at all times. Now go find an empty room and clean that weapon. I don’t want the office smelling of gun oil.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Then this Saturday morning you and your clean weapon will meet me at gun range where you will re-qualify.”

“Excuse me?”

“If you haven’t cleaned your weapon in longer than you can remember, that means you haven’t fired it in as long as you can remember. I need to know if it comes down to it, can you defend your unit, can you defend me?”

He tried to stare her down but failed. She may be only five foot five but she’d been in the army nineteen years and stared down her share of men. If nothing else AJ knew how to stand her ground. “You have your orders, Corporal.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He picked up the pieces to his weapon and his coffee and left the room.

AJ leaned back in her chair and felt like a hypocrite. The hind end of nowhere. That’s what she’d been thinking about just before she’d seen that poor excuse for a weapon. She lectured a twenty one year old kid about duty and preparedness. He’d been sent here for a reason and he was obligated to do his best. So was she. She grabbed her phone and looked for the County Sheriff’s office number and dialed.

“Sheriff’s office,” said a female voice.

“This is Major Cooper from Fort Huachuca. Is Sheriff Carson available?” She was put on hold until he picked up.

“Carson.”

“Sheriff? It’s Major Cooper.”

“I thought we’d agreed. John.”

“Hello John.”

“Hello AJ. What can I do for you?”

“I have a bit of an issue I’m hoping you can help me with. I’d rather not discuss it over the phone. Can I buy you lunch at the Inn?”

“You have my attention. What time?”

“Twelve thirty?”

“I’ll see you then.”

John sat at the Inn waiting for AJ. Truth was he'd been a little early. He was curious as to what was so important she felt she couldn't say over the phone. He stood when he saw her come in. She looked so different than she had the other day. Today she was in full camo uniform as opposed to Class A's. He'd lived here long enough to know that most officers wore Class A's. Her blonde hair was pulled into a tight bun and she looked very squared away. He stood to greet her.

"AJ."

"John, thank you for meeting me."

Cassie came out from behind the bar with a notepad and a smile for John. "What can I get you?"

"The usual, Cass."

Cassie turned to AJ and looked like she's stepped in horse crap. "And you Ma'am"

John could tell AJ was taken aback. Cassie had made it clear she was open to something more but John wasn't interested. She was a good kid but she was way too young for John to date. "I'm having a club sandwich."

"Sounds good. I'll have what he's having."

"Uh huh," she said as she turned and walked away.

"What did I do?" asked AJ.

"You have two strikes against you. First, you're Army. Her boyfriend signed up five years ago and she hasn't heard from him since."

Cassie came back with two ice teas, set them on the table, turned and left.

"What was the other strike? You said I had two strikes."

"You'll think it's funny."

"Try me."

"She's...well...jealous." John could feel his blush.

“Did you break up with her?”

“No. I never went out with her.”

“Why would I think that’s funny? She has good taste.”

If John hadn’t been blushing before he sure was now. “Thank you,” he said as he sipped his tea. “What was so secret that you couldn’t talk to me on the phone?”

AJ relayed the store of her Corporal’s gun and he understood her concern. If any of his deputies had a dirty weapon he’d be furious. “What can I do to help?”

“I’ve told him he has to clean his weapon and requalify.”

“If he had cleaned it so long as you’d notice, he hadn’t fired it.”

“Exactly. But the truth of the matter is I haven’t fired my gun in weeks. I want to practice without the entire post knowing about it. I was hoping you had a gun range I could use.”

“Sure thing. My place is just outside of town. You can practice as much as you want and no one will know.”

AJ leaned back against her chair. “Thank you.”

“What time do you get off work?”

“I can take the rest of the day, if I want.”

“Well then, will finish our lunch and will go from here.”

“I don’t want to pull you away from something.”

“It’s fine. The deputies can find me if they need me.” John sat back as Cassie brought their sandwiches. “Thanks, Cassie.”

“You’re welcome, John,” she smiled.

AJ stifled a laugh. “If looks could kill. You’re right. She’d like me to disappear.”

They finished their lunch while they discussed leading a policing unit. He had the same issues AJ had like people coming back from Mexico after too long a weekend. AJ insisted on paying because she invited him and he tried not to let it tweak his male ego. He smiled at the size of the tip she left Cassie.

“That was nice of you.”

“I’m sure I’ll be here again and I want to make sure she won’t poison my food.”

They walked out to the parking lot and AJ walked toward his patrol car. “No Harley?”

“No, he’s back at the ranch. I use him when I’m checking out the areas in desert. You can say hi to him when we get there.” He looked at AJ and smiled. “I have one requirement before we get to the ranch.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Oh really? And what would that be?”

John had never thought someone in combat boots could be so attractive. “What does AJ stand for?”

She sighed. “Fine. It’s stands for Alice Jane.”

“Why would you not want to tell people that? Alice is a perfectly respectable name. A little old fashioned but...” The it hit him. “Alice Cooper?”

“My parents are big fans.”

He tried to suppress a laugh. “Well still, not everyone would know...”

“Oh they know alright. Especially when my father shows up at my high school play in a concert shirt older than me,” She held up her forefinger and pinky finger and curled in the rest, “And says,” she adopted a gruff voice. “Rock on, baby girl.”

John lost it and laughed harder than he could remember. He saw she was suppressing a smile.

“Are you done?” she asked.

He wiped the tears from his cheeks. "Not yet." He laughed at the image of the mortally embarrassed sixteen year old AJ. He took a breath and sighed. "Okay, I'm good."

"I must like you, John Carson. I usually kick the ass of anyone who laughs at my name."

John pulled into his driveway and AJ pulled in behind her. He got out of the car and walked toward her. "Do you want to see Harley?"

"I'd love to." AJ looked around at the classic desert ranch house with the deep porch and curved tiled roof. There were large windows everywhere making the modestly sized house look large. "Oh John, this is beautiful."

"Thank you. My grandparents built it. Except for college, I've never lived anywhere else." He unlocked the front door and it opened into onto another, smaller patio room. "When it's too hot for outside I use this. I usually have my coffee here in the morning."

A fast moving yellow blur came at him. "Hey, Buddy," said John as he greeted the enthusiastic Yellow Labrador. "Buddy, this is AJ. Say hello." The dog sat and extended his paw.

"It is very nice to meet you, Buddy." She looked at John and smiled. "I'm very impressed. He's so well trained." With that Buddy jumped up on her and gave her a sloppy kiss.

"Buddy, down! I'm sorry, AJ. He usually doesn't do that. He's not mine, he belongs to my friend Jesse. He was taking his family on an overnight and I'm watching him."

"Don't worry. I'm happy to meet him too." She scratched behind his ear. "You're a good boy, aren't you Buddy." Buddy rolled over on his back and exposed his belly. AJ leaned over and gave him a good belly rub. "Not exactly a watch dog, is he?"

"He's not meant to be but he's usually not so...enthusiastic."

They walked through the house and AJ admired the clean, comfortable lines of the rest of the house. He led her to the back of the house and to the back door. Buddy tried to follow them but John stopped him. "Later, Buddy. Go lay down."

AJ smiled as the dog walked over to his bed in open den, circled around and laid down. "I'm impressed. Do you have the magic touch with all animals?"

John stopped and smiled. "It doesn't always work."

AJ thought to herself "I doubt that."

He pointed to the barn fifty feet from the house. "Harley's in his stall." They walked into the stall and grabbed an apple from a bag. "Hey there, Harley. You have company." Harley greeted John with a snort and a head bob. He stroke the horse's nose.

"Can I try that?"

"Sure."

AJ put her hand up and stroked Harley's beautiful hair. "You're such a handsome fellow."

John cut the apple in half and took AJ's hand. He turned it upright and held it toward Harley who immediately scooped it up. AJ giggled. "That tickled."

"You can give him the other half."

She noticed a well used, but empty stall. The name plate read "Daisy". Where's Daisy? "I loaned her to a Jesse for their trip. He was taken the family on a ride but he was a horse short."

She smiled as Harley took the other piece of apple from her hand. "Will the shots bother him?"

"They don't but we'll be far enough away from the house that he'll barely hear it. We better get going." He took the cover off an ATV. He pushed it outside of the barn and looked back at her. "Hop on." She got on to the seat and held on tight. John smelled of Old Spice and leather. She fought the urge to rest her head on his back. Ten minutes later they were at a homemade gun range. There was a rough hewn bench where they could set their weapons.

AJ looked around at an endless desert vista. "Is all this yours? It goes on forever."

John smiled as he looked out over the scene. "Yeah it does, but I only own forty acres of forever. My grandparents were cattle ranchers, so were my parents."

"You were only interested in law."

"Yeah, I got my degree from U of T."

“But you came back.”

“I can’t see myself living anywhere but here.” He smiled. He pulled some safety glasses and ear protection from a box under the bench. “You ready for this?”

“Let’s do it.” She unholstered her 9mm and set it on the bench. She accepted the safety gear.

“I have it set for seven, fifteen and twenty five yards. Let’s start at seven. He attached some human shaped paper targets and pushed a button. They slid back to seven yards.

“Are you shooting too?”

“Never hurts to keep it fresh.”

AJ put on her eye and ear protection and took aim at the target. She fired five shots and set her gun down. John did the same and set his weapon down. He hit the return button and the targets came toward them. AJ frowned. She’d hit three center mass but two hit the target’s shoulder. “Damn,” she muttered.

“What? That’s pretty good,” said John.

“I can’t afford pretty good.” She looked over at John’s target and saw it no longer had a head.

“Why the head shots?” she asked. “I’ve always been trained to go center mass.”

“Center mass is effective. It’ll stop most criminals. But if they’re wearing body armor all it will do is give them a nasty bruise.”

“Good point. Let’s do fifteen.” He hung up new targets and sent them back fifteen yards. She reloaded her clip and secured her protection. John tapped her on the shoulder to indicate he was ready. She nodded. She slowed her breathing and focused. She fired off seven shots. She set down her weapon and John hit the return button. He smiled when he saw her target. She’d hit four shots dead center in the chest and three in what would have been a forehead.

“That’s some good shooting, Major.”

“Thank you, Sheriff.”

They practiced until they both ran out of ammunition. She felt comfortable about Saturday. She knew she'd be able to help her Corporal with any issues he may have qualifying.

They rode back to the barn and secured the ATV. Then he freshened Harley's water and fed him his dinner. “He's such a beautiful boy,” said AJ.

John patted his long neck. “He is a good horse, aren't you, Harley?” The horse made a small snort like he was saying, “Leave me alone. I'm eating.”

“How about you join me for dinner. I can throw a couple of steaks on the grill.”

AJ looked at John and smiled. “I'd like that.”

John set the steaks on plates and set them on the patio table. He couldn't shake the feeling that something else was going on with her beside the trouble with her Corporal. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"What? Nothing. The food is delicious, the view is spectacular," she paused and smiled. "And the company is very pleasant."

"Thank you, but something is on your mind."

She sat back in her chair. "You're good, Sheriff."

"Tell me what's wrong." He sat down across from AJ.

"When I was talking to my Corporal he called this place the hind end of nowhere. I chastised him and told him that his government had sent him here for a reason and it was his duty to be prepared at all times."

"Why does that bother you? I would have told any of my deputies the same thing."

"What bothers me is not ten minutes before he came into the office I was thinking the same thing about this post."

"Oh," he said quietly. He took a sip of his ice tea.

"I was wallowing because I thought I should have had a more prestigious assignment."

"Why don't you."

"Pissed off the wrong General."

John smiled. "Was it for a good reason?"

"Yes. I don't regret what I did. I'd do it again but..."

"Now you're stuck in the hind end of nowhere."

"It's so arrogant of me. I have a duty. I signed up to serve, not for my own glory. That's not what it's supposed to be about. I'm ashamed of myself."

"It's the same reason I'm a cop. What do you think now?"

“Now?” She looked out over the vast space that was John’s ranch. She looked back at him and smiled. “I think I wasn’t seeing the forest for the trees.” John laughed. “This place has a certain beauty. This may be my terminal assignment, but I’m going to do my duty to the best of my ability.”

“Terminal assignment?”

“My last assignment before I retire. Part of pissing off the wrong General meant I got passed over for promotion to Colonel. Once that happens it’s time to get out. I’ll hit my twenty early next year.”

“Twenty years? When did you sign up? When you were twelve?”

AJ smiled. “I knew I liked you for a reason. If that was your roundabout way of asking how old I am, I’m forty three.”

“Oh,” he said as he took a bite of his steak.

“What, ‘oh’?”

“Nothing. How’s your steak?”

“It’s fine, but you know that. What is your problem with my age?”

“I don’t have a problem with your age.”

“Okay, you’re obviously not married. The waitress is about half my age, but you’ve never dated her.” She held up her left hand. “I’m not married. My conclusion is you were going to ask me out but now you’re thinking twice about it. Why?”

“I’m impressed, Major.” He smiled and set down his fork. ‘AJ, I’m fifty five years old.”

“And?”

“What do you mean ‘and’? Isn’t that enough?”

“No, not at all. Let’s look at this the way we would any investigation. When you first saw me, what did you think?”

“Well, I..”

“Oh, come on. What did you think?”

“I thought ‘Who’s the gorgeous blonde and how do I get her number?’”

AJ smiled. “You thought I was gorgeous?”

“Still do.”

“Why didn’t you ask me for my number then?”

“Because you showed me your badge. I knew we’d have to work together.”

“But we don’t work for the same organizations. There would be nothing in either of our regs that would prevent us from seeing each other.”

“AJ I’m twelve years older than you.”

“Noted. Okay, let’s turn this investigation around. Do you know what I thought when I first saw you?”

John smiled. “What?”

“I thought ‘Oh Lord, let this not be a fake cowboy.’”

“Fake cowboy?”

“You know the type. They dress the part but could ride or shoot to save their lives. But I figured out pretty quick you were the real deal.”

“How?”

“Your hat is well worn, your chaps were broken in and your boots are at least five years old.”

John smiled and nodded. “Well done, Major.”

“You know what else I thought? I thought it’s true what they say about cowboys.”

“What do they say about cowboys?”

“Women can’t resist them.”

“Oh really,” he laughed.

“Really, especially when you took off your sunglasses. Any woman is helpless against those blue eyes. Just ask Cassie. It’s really unfair, you know.” She smiled and took another sip of tea.

“Do you know what I thought when you walked through the door in uniform?”

“What?”

“I thought it was only supposed to be women who were attracted to men in uniform, not the other way around.”

AJ picked up her empty plate and carried it to the kitchen. John picked up his plate and followed. “Well then,” she said. “What do you think about this situation?”

John smiled and brushed his hand over her cheek. “I’m still a great deal older than you.”

“So you are discounting the evidence that we are both mutually attracted to each other.”

“I’m not discounting it’s just...”

“Oh for heavens, sake,” said AJ as she ran her hands up John’s chest and looped them around her neck. She pulled him into a kiss. She pulled back and looked into his eyes. “Tell me, Sheriff. Are you going to ignore the evidence?”

John smiled a broad grin. “Hell no.”

John was trying to hide his smile. He and AJ had a great time together. They'd watched a movie after dinner although he couldn't say what was the plot or who was in it. He couldn't resist a snicker then he thought about making out with a woman in combat boots. He'd asked her out for tonight, dinner at Marsello's. It wasn't as fancy a place as you'd find in Phoenix but it was as dressy as it got in Cochise County.

"Morning, Sheriff," said Savannah. She was a sweet kid, five foot three, with dark brown hair and eyes. She started with the department as a high school intern. She'd stayed after high school, moving from filing clerk, to receptionist to dispatcher.

"Morning. Anything going on?"

"No. All quiet."

"That's good." He noticed she'd tucked a book under some paperwork. "What are you reading?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Savannah," he said.

"Fine. Sometimes working with cops is a pain." She pulled the book out from under and the papers. He smiled when he saw it was a training manual for the Police Academy. "Go ahead. Laugh."

"Why would I laugh?"

"My friends laughed, my parents laughed." She pointed to the bull pen of deputies. "Frank laughed. He said know one would take me seriously because I'm so little. He said there isn't any pixie police."

John looked toward Frank who was sucking down what was probably not his first donut of the day. "Well, everyone is wrong. You are intelligent, dependable and most important you have a good heart. Most people don't take that into account when doing police work. When to push hard and when to lay off. I've also seen you ride. You can ride circles around anyone in the department. If you stay in this area being able to handle a horse during a pursuit off road is essential. I think you'd make an excellent deputy."

Savannah gasped. "You do?"

"Yes I do. In fact, when you make an application I would be happy to give you a recommendation."

"Really?"

"Really," he said. "Go ahead with your reading and don't let anyone give you a hard time about it."

"Thanks, Sheriff," she said with a bright smile.

He walked toward his office but stopped at Frank's desk. "You finish those reports for the state yet?"

"Almost, boss."

"Well then, I suggest you lose the donut and get to it." He leaned closer and said. "You know Savannah is studying for the Academy entrance exam. We'll be lucky to get her as a deputy."

John turned toward his office and smiled. The look on Frank's face was priceless. John had simultaneously given Savannah his support and assured that no one would give her a hard time. He sat down at his desk and picked up the phone to make dinner reservations.

AJ was trying to get ready for dinner, trying being the operative word. She was fumbling with the clasp on her bracelet. She didn't regularly wear jewelry other than small post earrings. She'd put on a simple blue sheath and black pumps. Spending her life in combat boots meant stilettos were a non-starter. She'd let her hair down and put on some light makeup. She made another attempt to put on her bracelet and finally gave up.

She looked at herself in the mirror. She wasn't used to seeing herself in anything other than a uniform. She'd checked out the restaurant and she thought this would be suitable.

"God, why am I so nervous?" she asked her reflection. "Why? Because I haven't been on a real date in ages." She smiled all day thinking about spending the evening with John. It felt so comfortable. And boy, could he kiss. Her heart leapt to her throat when she heard the knock on her door. She opened the front door and smiled. "Wow," she whispered. John was wearing a dark blue suit with a light blue shirt and dark blue tie. "Please come in." She closed the door behind him and turned to see him staring. "What is it?" She nervously brushed at her dress.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered as he leaned in and gave her a soft kiss.

"Thank you. You look very handsome."

He smiled. "You're not disappointed that I'm not wearing my Stetson and boots."

"Not at all," she said as she slid her hands up his chest and kissed him.

"As much as I'd like to continue this we should get going."

"Yes, of course. First, could you help me with something?" She picked up her bracelet from the coffee table. John took the bracelet and quickly fastened it around her wrist. "Thank you." She looked at him and smiled. "I guess we should get going."

John escorted AJ to their table. He always liked Marsello's and one of the perks of being the county sheriff was he could always get a reservation. Truth was he could probably just walk in and get a table but he didn't like taking advantage. He held out the chair for her as she sat down.

"This is lovely," said AJ.

"I like it. Mike has a nice place." A tall man with sandy blonde hair came toward their table. "Speak of the devil."

"John, it's been too long," he said shaking John's hand.

"That it has. Mike, this is Major AJ Cooper. She's the new commander of the MP unit at Huachuca."

Mike paused and then extended his hand. "It's very nice to meet you, Major."

"AJ, please."

"I hope you will make my place a regular stop," he said and kissed her hand.

"Down boy," said John.

Mike laughed. "Sorry, force of habit. Hard wired into my DNA."

AJ laughed. "Well then I can't possibly fault you for it, can I?"

"I need to get back to my kitchen. It was very nice to meet you."

John leaned back against his chair and looked at the menu.

"Don't be annoyed with your friend," said AJ.

"What?"

"You're annoyed with your friend. Don't be."

"He's a hound."

"He was covering his surprise."

"What surprise?"

"That a short blonde is a Major and an MP."

John smiled. "More like gorgeous blonde, and he was flirting."

"Nope, just surprised."

"How do you know?"

“His eyes. They dilated a bit when you mentioned what I do. You can tell an awful lot just from peoples eyes.”

“Really?” he smiled. He leaned in over his menu. “What do you see in my eyes?” She looked into his eyes and studied him for a moment. He suddenly wondered what she would be like interrogating a witness. She smiled and sat back. “Well? What do you see?”

“Possibilities.”

His heart pounded as he tried to focus on his menu. He didn’t remember the last time a woman affected him the way AJ did.

“What do you recommend?” asked AJ.

“It’s all good. I lobster ravioli.”

“Sounds great.”

The waitress came to their table to take their order. “Hey Sheriff, It’s been too long.”

“That seems to be the consensus. AJ, this is Anna. Anna, this is Major Cooper.”

“Major, huh. Wow. I’d have never guessed.” She looked back at John. “Have you decided or do you need a minute. “

“I’m good. AJ?”

“I’ll have the lobster ravioli.”

“Make that two. Club soda for me. AJ?”

“I’m not driving so I’ll have a glass of merlot.”

“Uh huh,” she said as she walked away.

“I wonder what’s up with her. Anna is never that rude.”

“You’re always here alone.”

“Not always.”

“You’re never here on a date.”

“Well...”

“Jealous.”

“What, Anna? You’re being ridiculous.”

“No I’m not.”

“That’s crazy.”

“Okay, let’s analyze this. You are a single, handsome man and beautiful women don’t like the idea that you might be dating someone. It doesn’t take a cop to figure that out.”

“I think you are overestimating my appeal.” Anna brought their drinks while shooting AJ daggers.

AJ sipped her wine. “No, I’m not.”

“John?” John turned around and saw a man with jet black hair and darkly tanned skin come toward them.

“Jesse? What the hell? John smiled and stood giving them a tight hug. Then they started speaking in a language she didn’t recognize. Jesse pointed to AJ and smiled and continued to say things she didn’t understand. John switched back to English. “AJ this is Jesse Begay. He’s a member of the Tohono O’Odham tribe. He’s our counterpart on the reservation. AJ extended her hand.

“It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Our counterpart?” asked Jesse.

“AJ is Major AJ Cooper, the head of the MP unit at Huachuca.”

Jesse looked shocked. “Don’t worry, Jesse. Nobody believes when they see me in civvies.” She pulled her badge out of her wallet and showed it to him. “Was that your native language you were speaking?”

“Yeah,” Jesse pushed at John’s shoulder. “He’s a little rusty. You’ll have to come out for some barbeque and practice.” He looked back at AJ. “Bring your girlfriend.”

John looked at AJ who smiled. “I’d loved to.”

“I’ll let you get back to your dinner. Theresa hates it when I start glad handing.”

“Give her my love and I’ll call you about next week.”

“Will do.”

John sat back down and smiled broadly.

“What?”

“You didn’t correct him when he called you my girlfriend.”

AJ took a sip of her wine and smiled. “Yeah, how about that?”

Dinner was excellent as always. John and AJ talked about working the area and how to work with the indigenous population. “The fort provides a lot of jobs off post. We try to keep a balance. Between the three departments,” said John.

“No mashed toes. Got it,” said AJ.

“Fortunately there isn’t too much going on here. A few property crimes. D&D’s.”

“What about the drug trade? We’re pretty close to the border.”

“We’re also pretty far from the interstate and airports. Any planes landing locally would be noticed in a heartbeat. Even if they did, they’d have hours of driving a head of them before they find a bigger town. And even if they still tried to fly it in the army would shoot them down.

“So we’re pretty safe from major bad guys,” said AJ.

“Pretty much,” said John.

“So it looks like I can count on a quiet last year before retirement.”

John laughed. “I can’t imagine you sitting on a rocking chair. What do you have planned?”

“I don’t know. I thought I’d spend some time with my parents, then travel some. Find a beach and a cabana boy to bring me drinks with little umbrellas in it.”

“Where are your parents?”

“LA.”

“So you’re a surfer girl.”

“No, I love the water but risking my neck on a waxed board, no thank you. What about you?”

“I grew up with horses. Maybe when I retire I’ll raise some horses, maybe teach riding.”

“I could see that. You seem to have a calm nature. That would serve you well with the horses and the students.”

“Do you know how to ride?”

“I don’t.”

John got a big smile. “Want to?”

John drove AJ back to her apartment. “How come you don’t live on post?”

“Because the BOQ hasn’t been renovated since Eisenhower.”

“Good reason.”

They walked to her front door. “Would you like to come in?”

“Sure.” he said with a smile.

She put a coffee pod in the machine and stuck a cup under the spout. “The restaurant was lovely.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” he said as he put his hands around her waist and pulled her close. He gave her a quick kiss as she turned and pulled the mug from the machine.

“Milk?”

“Black is fine.” He took a sip and then she took it from and set it on the counter.

“I don’t want coffee, but I do enjoy the taste of it.” She pulled him into a deep kiss. “Ummm, delicious.”

“Yes, it is.”

“John, I know we’ve only known each other a short time.”

“True,” he smiled.

“It’s Friday night and I don’t have to be at the gun range until nine tomorrow,” she smiled.

“Okay?”

AJ laughed. “You’re going to make me ask.”

“I do believe I am.”

“John, would you like to stay?” He gave her a deep, coffee flavored kiss. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

He smiled and leaned his forehead against AJ’s and whispered. “Yes.”

AJ led John upstairs, silently grateful she'd tidied up her bedroom. John looked around and smiled. "What is it?"

"You are a kick ass, squared away army major," he walked over to her bed and picked one of several teddy bears. "What is this?"

"Who. Who is that? That is Frank." She pointed to a several other bears, "That's Joshua, and that's Jake." She took them off the bed and set them on her desk. John handed her Frank and she set him on the desk. He took her hands and turned her toward him.

"What is it, Alice?"

"No matter where I was stationed they were here to keep me company."

"But you made friends."

"Not so many. I like quiet. I read a lot. I'm not a big party person. Most of my colleagues were married." She smiled at John. "Surprisingly I was not a frequent guest of the wives."

"I can understand that." AJ shot him a look. "Not that they're right. But honestly, darlin, no woman wants their man being friends with a woman as beautiful as you."

"Okay you dug yourself out of that one."

"That's good," he whispered as he gave her a soft kiss. "Now where were we before we were interrupted by your Teddy Bear Posse?"

"Excuse me?"

"Well, one has a Phillies uniform, one has an Army uniform and the other is wearing what looks like pj's so he's not so intimidating, but the others.

AJ smiled. "You're safe. They're good at taking orders. They listen to me."

"That's good to know. Now where were we?"

"I believe I was about to do this," She reached up and loosened his tie. She pulled it off and she grabbed a wooden hanger. She slipped it over the wrung. "It's a very nice

tie. I wouldn't want to see it get messed up. She slipped off his jacket and put it on the back of the chair. She slowly started unbuttoned his shirt. John stood still while she slipped the shirt off his shoulders. As she walked behind him, she gasped and ran her hand over the eagle tattooed on his back. "This is beautiful," she whispered. He would have thanked her but he seemed to have lost the ability to speak. She put his shirt on the hanger and then reached for his belt. "May I?"

"Please," he choked out.

She took off his belt and strung it over the hook. She smiled as she careful unzipped his slacks as he kicked off his shoes. She carefully hung his slacks and jacket and hung the hanger in her closet. "Such a nice suit. I wouldn't want it to get all wrinkled."

"Alice, sweetheart, you're killing me." She smiled as she walked toward him and turned around. He reached for her zipper and pulled it down. Her dress slipped off her shoulders and dropped to the ground. AJ picked up her dress and turned around. She was wearing nothing but dark blue lingerie and her heels. Every inch of her five and one half feet pale skin was toned to perfection. "Sweet Jesus," he whispered. She hung up her dress and smiled. "Woman, if you hang up your lingerie I will lose my mind."

"I wouldn't want that to happen."

He took her in his arms and kissed her as he unhooked her bra and let it fall to the ground. He ran his hands down her back and under the lace panties, pushing them to the ground. She squealed when he picked her up and put her on the bed. He kicked off his boxers then covered her with his body. He nipped at her ear. "You are so beautiful."

"John, I want you so much. I wanted you the moment I saw you."

He looked up from his travels down body. "Oh yeah?"

"I told you, it's the cowboy thing. It gets to me."

"Well, Ma'am, I will endeavor not to disappoint."

AJ's laughter quickly turned to moans. "Please John," she whispered. "I need you."

John looked into AJ's and saw a passion in her eyes that made his heart skip a beat. He slipped inside her and lost himself in her heat. She wrapped her legs around his waist and the desire he'd seen in her eyes came to life.

John took a moment to realize he wasn't in his own bed. He rolled over and saw AJ wasn't in bed with him. He heard the shower turn off and a few minutes later AJ came out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel. Her gold hair was tied loosely on top of her head. "Good Morning," she said as she pulled out the tie and fluffed out her hair. "John? What? She walked toward him and sat on the edge of the bed. "Are you in there?"

"My God, woman, you're beautiful." He flipped her over him and pulled open her towel.

Anna giggled. "John what are you doing?"

"Woman, you have to ask?" He kissed her deeply while rubbing his hands over her warm skin.

"As much as I'm enjoying this I'm due on the rifle range in less than an hour. So how about this? I don't expect to be any later than noon. Maybe we could spend the rest of the weekend together?" She pulled him into a deep kiss. "How does that sound? She whispered.

"That sounds terrific. How about we go to the ranch and I can start teaching you to ride?"

"Really? That's sounds great!"

John reluctantly let her up. "I'll go get us some coffee." He made two mugs of coffee and walked back into the bedroom. He watched her as she buttoned up a fresh uniform and laced up her boots. She sat down at a vanity table and tied her hair into a neat bun. She then went to her gun safe and pulled out her 9mm and stuck it into her hip holster. She turned and saw him staring. "You're staring again."

He handed her a mug of coffee. "You really are beautiful."

AJ met Corporal Johnson at the firing at precisely nine a.m. The Army was big on precision and so was she. Corporal Johnson saluted and she returned his salute. "Good morning, Corporal."

"Ma'am."

She sat down at the work table. "Let me see your sidearm." AJ did a quick inspection of the weapon. She pushed it back across the table. "Disassemble it, please."

Johnson disassembled the weapon and she inspected each piece. Johnson seemed to have learned his lesson. This weapon would pass the strictest of inspections. "Well done, Johnson. Reassemble it, please." The corporal reassembled his sidearm in record time and set it back down on the table. He looked at AJ as if he was looking for her to find fault. "Alright, lets see how you and this fine weapon do on the firing range." She stood and knocked on the door to the small control room. The door opened and a lanky black man opened the door. "Sergeant Tompkins, Thank you. I really do appreciate you opening the range for me today. With all the traveling and unpacking from the move I need the practice."

"You're welcome, Major."

"My Corporal has accompanied me. I find I do better with a little competition."

Tompkins smiled, "Yes, Ma'am" He shut himself inside the control.

She turned back to Johnson. "You ready, Corporal?" She smiled at the surprised look on his face. "Well?"

"Yes, Ma'am"

They approached the target line, put on ear protection and got ready for the first round at seven yards. "Ready fire," shouted Tompkins over the PA. AJ and Johnson fired at the targets and then set their weapons down.

"Cease fire," called Tomkins. The automated pulley system moved the targets toward them. Both had solid center mass.

AJ looked over at Johnson and nodded. "Ready for fifteen yards?"

“Yes Ma’am.” Johnson put a fresh target on AJ’s pulley as she reloaded.

“Thank you, Corporal.”

He responded with a shy smile. “You’re welcome, Ma’am.” He reloaded his weapon and they hit the buttons that sent their targets to fifteen yards. She signaled Tompkins and he came over the PA.

“Ready fire.” AJ and Johnson fired their weapons and set them down when finished. “Cease Fire,” called Tompkins and the targets moved back to them. Both had shot a solid center mass.

“Not bad, Corporal,” said AJ with a smile.

“You’re no slouch either, Major.”

“Twenty five yards?” asked AJ.

“Yes, Ma’am.” He repeated setting AJ’s target and they repeated their firing sequence at twenty five yards. When the targets were pulled back she looked at both targets and smiled.

“Excellent grouping, Corporal.”

“Thank you, Major. Does this mean you aren’t going to write me up?”

“Who said anything about writing you up? I gave you an order and you completed it in an excellent manner. Why would I write you up?” AJ smiled to herself when she could feel the tension drain from his face. “I have every confidence that you could defend anyone in your unit, including me.”

Johnson risked a small laugh. “Yes, Ma’am.”

“You know, Corporal, something has recently been brought to my attention. We are all taught to shoot center mass. But what happens if the adversary is wearing body armor? What then? Our bullets might slow him down but it wouldn’t stop him.”

“Head shots?”

“That’s what I’m thinking. There is no regular training for that situation. I’d like you to look into the regs and see what you can find. Maybe you can prepare a briefing and we can take it to the commander.”

“Me, Ma’am?”

“You’re a hell of a shot, Johnson. And besides, what else is there to do in the hind end of nowhere.”

Johnson laughed. “Yes Ma’am. I’ll get right on it.”

“Monday will do. Enjoy your weekend.” AJ let Tompkins know they were finished and thanked him again for opening the range. He took a look at the targets and whistled. “Damn, Corporal. You’re a hell of a shot.”

Johnson smiled and nodded toward AJ. “Those aren’t mine.”

AJ pulled up to John's ranch. It was thirty minutes outside of town but it might as well have been hours. John told her his nearest neighbor was twenty minutes by car or ten minutes by horse. She'd stopped at her place and changed out of her uniform and was wearing a light sundress and some cute sandals. She knew she couldn't walk around outside like this so she'd packed an overnight bag with jeans, a light long sleeve shirt and she'd picked up some cowboy boots on her way out of town.

She was hoping to make a good impression. She spent so much time in uniform it was easy to forget she was female. All John had to do was look at her and he reminded her that she was definitely a woman. She took a breath and knocked on the front door. The door opened and John froze. Then he broke into a broad smile.

"Dear God, Woman. You're going to give me a heart attack." He reached for her hand and pulled her into the house, shutting the door behind her. He pulled her close for a deep kiss.

"I take it this means you like the dress."

"No, I like who's inside the dress." He kissed her again and rubbed his hand over her bare shoulder. "You do know that your fair skin will boil in the Texas sun in this dress," he whispered as he placed a kiss on her neck.

"I know. These are inside clothes." She hesitated before she said, "I brought some outside clothes. They're in my overnight bag in the car."

"Clever girl." He walked her into the living room. AJ loved the large open floor plan. It was very comfortable and beat the hell out of her one bedroom apartment. The only thing it had up on John's place was a pool. She looked at the coffee table and there was a large wrapped box with a bow on it.

"Someone's birthday?"

"No." He led her to the couch and sat down. "I had to make a run into the city today and I found this store." He handed her the box.

“For me?” she tore at the paper, pulled off the lid and gasped. “Oh John,” she whispered. She pulled out a brown teddy bear in full cowboy gear, including a hat, boots and a sheriff’s star.

“I thought Texas needed a little representation in your posse.” He was stunned when he saw her crying. “AJ, baby, what’s the matter?”

She smiled and wiped her cheek. “The bears are something comforting I can take with me from assignment to assignment. They remind me that I’m not just a uniform and a gun. They remind there is another part of me. But I bought all those bears myself. No one every gave me one.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks and gave him a soft kiss. “No flowers or jewelry could have made me happier.” John pulled her close.

“Ah, baby I’d like to give you a hug but someone is jabbing his boots in my stomach.”

AJ smiled and set her new bear aside. “Don’t worry, Sheriff. I won’t let the deputy get in your way.”

“Oh, he’s a deputy, is he?”

“Absolutely. He’ll be able to protect me when you’re not around.”

John’s eye’s softened and he caressed her cheek. “I hope that won’t be that often.”

AJ smiled. “Me too.”

John couldn't help smiling as he grabbed AJ's bag out of her car. He'd had the occasional overnight guest over the years but he'd never asked any to stay the weekend. He'd never known anyone like AJ. There really wasn't anyone like AJ. She was lovely and feminine but she could probably kick his ass.

As he came back into the living room he saw her staring out the window. "It really is beautiful here."

"I'm surprised you think so coming from LA with ocean and the trees."

"I admit I do love the water. It's the only reason I picked the apartment I did, for the pool. But this as a different kind of beauty."

He came up from behind her and rubbed his hands over her shoulders. "I've got your bag. Guest room?"

AJ turned and smiled. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Honestly I didn't want to presume. It's been a long time since I've been in this situation."

"Me too."

"Okay, I'll just take it upstairs."

"I assume you have a gun safe."

He narrowed his eyes. "Of course."

"Good. I packed my side arm."

"Do you think you'll need it?"

"Sheriff, do you ever go anywhere without your ID and your sidearm?"

"No."

She opened her purse and walked toward him. She smiled and flashed her badge. "Neither do I."

“I’m sorry, AJ. It’s hard for me to look at you dressed like that and remember what you do.”

“It’s ok. No one ever believes me if I’m not uniform. Sometimes, not even then.”

“Pixie Police.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s something my deputy said to my dispatcher. She’s been studying for the entrance exam to the Police Academy. My deputy made fun of her and said there was no pixie police, because she’s petite, like you.”

“What did you do?”

“I told her to keep studying and I would give her a recommendation. And I buried my deputy in a mountain of paperwork.”

She smiled and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, on behalf of Pixie Police everywhere.”

“Come with me and I’ll give you the combination to the safe.” AJ followed him up the stairs and looked around his bedroom. “Very nice. Masculine without being too butch.”

John laughed. “What’s too butch?”

“Dead animals hanging from the walls.”

“I don’t hunt for sport.”

“I imagine you take some heat for that.”

“Some. I carry a gun for a living. I don’t enjoy ending a life, no matter who or what life it is.” He realized she was staring at him. “What?”

“John Carson, I like who you are. A lot.”

He gave her a soft kiss. “I like who you are too. A lot.” He turned and opened the gun safe. She opened her overnight bag and pulled her 9mm out of her holster.

“Here you go.”

“How did it go with your corporal?”

“Very well. His weapon was spotless and his shooting was excellent. I’ve got him looking into Army regs for head shots for suspects in body armor.”

“I thought you said he did well?”

“He did. Very well. I discussed with him putting together a presentation for the commander.”

“Isn’t that a bit above his pay grade?”

“Under normal circumstances, yes. But the Fort runs with a smaller staff than most. If Johnson puts together a good presentation it would look good in his file.”

John smiled. “Yeah, I like who you are, Major Cooper.” He slipped his arms around her waist. “7388.”

“Excuse me?”

“The code for the safe.”

“Why don’t we go have lunch and then we can go riding.”

They had a light lunch and the AJ went upstairs to change. She put on jeans and a light blue oxford shirt. She put on the boots she'd bought and hoped she wouldn't look ridiculous. She grabbed her Phillies cap as John came into the bedroom. "Well, will you look at that, real cowboy boots, he smiled.

"Are they okay?"

"They're fine but I thought you didn't like them because you boots all week."

She blushed and walked toward him. "The truth is I could wear my Class "A"s if I wanted. I wear my fatigues and boots because I'm...terrified of snakes."

"You are?"

"Snakes, scorpions, spiders. If it would be featured in a horror movie I'm terrified of it."

He smiled and gave her a hug. "Don't worry we'll be practicing in the paddock and maybe going down a trail that's very well worn."

"Are you sure?"

"I tell you what. I'll bring my side arm. I'd rather you not bring yours because being on the horse for the first time and firing could be tricky. I'd rather you not shoot Daisy. Jesse brought her back this morning and took Buddy back. She's a sweet girl, very gentle. But you have to be very nice to her. She's Harley's girlfriend and he doesn't tolerate nonsense."

AJ smiled at him. "Why do I think he learned that from someone?"

He looked at her Phillies hat and said, "Sorry, this won't work. I have a hat you can use. And with your fair skin your going to need a bandana." He reached into his drawer, pulled out a red bandana and tied it around her neck, making sure to cover her exposed skin.

"So that what these are for. I thought they were just supposed to make you look cool."

“No they have a purpose, especially for someone as fair as you. Now for a hat.”
He left the bedroom and came back with a small brown cowboy hat. “Here let’s see if this fits.” He set it on her head and smiled. “Perfect.”

“This is obviously too small for you. Old girlfriend?”

“No. It was Mom’s.”

“Oh, John. I don’t know. Are you sure?”

“Sweetheart, she’d be thrilled. Now come on. Harley and Daisy are waiting on us.”

John couldn't help but stare at AJ. She might be terrified of snakes but she loved horses. She'd greeted Harley first, then he'd introduced her to Daisy. It was love at first sight. If he wasn't careful, she'd be bringing Daisy into the house. She was rubbing her neck and whispering to her. "Hey, you two. No keeping secrets."

"I was just making sure Harley was treating her right."

"And?"

"She says he hogs the treats. Like, right now she'd like an apple."

"Oh would she now?" John reached into a bag and pulled out a couple of apples. He pulled out a pocket knife and cut each in half. He gave AJ apples for Daisy and he fed pieces to Harley. AJ giggled as Daisy ate her treat. He looked at her and smiled. She seemed so natural here. He could get used to this. "Let's say we get them out in the paddock." John showed her how to saddle the horses. She mounted Daisy and sat like she wasn't scared. "It's okay. Daisy's a very calm girl but horses will pick up on your nervousness. Just give her a good pet and follow me."

John mounted Harley and pulled along side Daisy. Harley nuzzled her and John pulled him back. "Easy there, Romeo." He showed AJ how to hold the reins and move Daisy forward. They circled around the paddock until John led them down the trail. They picked up the pace and AJ seemed to be having a good time. "How are you doing over there?"

"I'm good. Daisy is taking good care of me. It's so beautiful out here. How far are the mountains?"

"They're a lot farther than they look. Maybe one day when you're more experienced we'll ride out there. Speaking of which, we should turn back. You've been out long enough."

They rode back to the paddock and John showed her how to brush down Daisy. He scooped up grain for Harley and AJ insisted on feeding Daisy. He watched her put the saddle back where it belonged and moving the grain buckets. She found the hose and

made sure Daisy had fresh water. She walked toward him with the hose and caught him staring at her. "What?"

"I don't know if I should say it or not?"

"Now you have to."

"I was just thinking, Damn, you're strong."

She smiled and kissed his cheek. "Thanks. Will Harley let me in to fill his water trough?"

"He should be fine." He watched as she walked into Harley's stall and pet his nose.

"Hello you handsome fellow." She filled his trough came out of the stall and put the hose back where it belonged.

"You do know I would have helped you with all of that."

"What?" She looked around the stalls and smiled. "Force of habit. I carry my own weight."

"Well how about I carry your weight?" He scooped her up in his arms and carried her out of the barn.

"John Carson, what are you doing? I smell like horse."

He gave her a kiss. "You smell like a cowgirl." He set her down in the kitchen and gave her a real kiss.

"Keep that thought but I'm going to get a shower." She leaned in and whispered "Care to join me?" She turned and ran through the living room and up the stairs to the bedroom. As he was running after her he thanked his stars he'd decided to have lunch at the Inn when he did. He looked around the bedroom and didn't see her.

"Woman, where'd you go."

"You looking for me?" He turned around to see her standing naked in the bathroom. "How did you get undressed so fast?"

She walked toward him and slipped her arms around his neck. “Is that your take away from this situation?” She snatched the cowboy hat off his head and threw it in the bedroom. John looked over and saw his hat had landed on the bedpost.

“You have amazing aim.”

She pulled his face back to her. “You again are missing the point. You have a naked woman in your arms.”

He smiled and looked her up and down. “Well, what do you know about that?” He picked her up in his arms and took her into the bathroom. He set her down and stripped off his clothes while she turned on the shower. She got into the shower and stood under the water. John watched for a moment before he joined her. He grabbed a bar of soap and washcloth and began washing AJ’s body. He grabbed the shampoo and massaged it into her long hair. He repeated the process with the conditioner and lost himself in the touch of her.

“My turn,” she whispered. She took the soap and cloth and massaged his skin. She had to stand on her toes to wash his hair. When he rinsed off he grabbed a towel and toweled off AJ’s hair. She wrapped the towel around herself and opened the shower door. He dried off his hair and wrapped the towel around his waist. He found her in his bedroom running a comb through her hair and that was all. She’d hung the towel on a clothes hook on the back of the door.

“Good Lord, woman,” he whispered as he ran his hands up her waist and over her breasts.

“Do you realize you call me woman a lot. Is that a possessive word or merely a Texas expression?”

He stared at her in the mirror. “What do you want it to be, Alice Jane?”

Her smile made his heart race. “I’d like it to be the possessive word.” Her smile turned sly. “Of course that would make you my man.”

He turned her around and smiled. “I do believe you’re correct, Major.”

“I usually am, Sheriff.”

They had a quiet dinner and talked about the ride. "Okay, give me your honest opinion. How did I do?" asked AJ.

He leaned in and gave her a kiss. "In the shower? You hit all the right spots."

AJ laughed and threw her napkin at him. "No, how did I do riding?"

"Seriously? You're a natural. How are you feeling? Are you sore? We were out for a while."

"I'm a little stiff but the shower helped."

John winked. "You are in very good shape."

"I do work out when I'm not riding horses and chasing after good looking sheriffs."

John took her hand. "You didn't have to chase me darlin. I came willingly." He gave her a quick kiss and picked up the empty plates. Together they cleaned up after dinner. Once he set the dishwasher, he opened the freezer. "I have some ice cream." She closed the door and smiled.

"Later." She took him by the hand and led him upstairs.

"You're not going to make me run after you?"

She turned at the entrance to the bedroom. "You don't have to run after me. You've already caught me." She smiled and pulled off her t-shirt. She slipped off her shorts and stood before him in small panties and bra. He pulled off his t-shirt and shorts and she pulled down the bedspread. He delighted in removing her lingerie and pulling her into his arms.

"You are so beautiful, Alice Jane."

"John, you make me feel beautiful."

He put everything he felt into one kiss, one touch, one embrace. AJ writhed under until he couldn't wait anymore. "AJ, baby I need you."

"I'm yours," she whispered.

He looked into her eyes, held her face close as he joined her. There had never been anyone who'd meant as much to him as Alice Jane, certainly not so quickly. He whispered to her in Tohono O'Odham. He stroked her until she flew apart underneath him. He held her close and wondered how to convince AJ the desert would be a great place to retire.

AJ cuddled up against John's chest sighing with contentment. She hadn't felt this good in...well...forever. "What was that you were saying to me?"

He whispered in her ear, "I was saying how beautiful you are."

"It's such a pretty language. Do you think you could teach me?"

"I'll teach you what I know but as Jess told you I'm a little rusty." He held her tight and kissed her forehead. "Why didn't you ever marry?"

She laughed. "No one ever asked. Why didn't you?"

"I never met anyone I wanted to ask, much to my mother's consternation."

"Is that why she'd be happy I was wearing her hat?"

"Yes, ma'am. She was always asking me to bring someone home."

"You never did?" AJ leaned up on her elbow. "Never?"

"Nope."

She sat back against the pillow. "I guess I don't count because I invited myself over to use your target range."

John hovered over AJ. "You count. You will always count."

John thought he was dreaming at first until he realized someone was pounding on his front door.

“John?” asked AJ.

“Stay here. I’ll see who it is.”

“Who knocks on the door at three a.m.?”

“They better have a good reason,” John growled. He threw on his boxers and walked to the front door. He looked through the peep hole and saw Jesse Begay. John opened the door and he came in. “Jesse, what the hell? This better be good.”

“I need your help.”

“What’s going on.”

“You know Fred Davies?”

“Yeah. Blowhard, drinks too much.”

“Usually he just sleeps it off but he’s holding his wife and kids hostage. Keeps saying that the world is against him and they’d all be better off dead.”

“Ah crap. Family annihilator.”

“Exactly, that’s why I thought I’d stop and ask for your help. My men are on site but this is an all hands on deck situation.”

“Are they going to be okay with me on reservation territory?”

“John, they’re too worried about Fred killing his kids.”

“John?”

They both looked upstairs and saw AJ standing at the top of the stairs wearing John’s t-shirt. Jesse looked at John and put his hand on his shoulder. “Oh, buddy I’m sorry.”

“I heard what’s going on. I’ll get dressed. I have my sidearm.”

“Ah, Major, this isn’t a military situation. Nobody is going to obey orders.”

“Jesse, I’ve done more in the last twenty years than sit at a desk. I wouldn’t put myself in the situation if I couldn’t be of assistance. John, you going in your boxers?” She turned and went back to the bedroom.

“She’s something else,” said Jesse.

“You have no idea.”

They followed Jesse's truck in John's squad car. He didn't know about this. AJ rode a desk and she had a unit of MP's under her command. She wouldn't get out in the field any more than he did.

"Do you have an extra vest?" she asked.

"AJ, I don't know about this."

"What I told Jesse is true. I wouldn't be here if I couldn't help. Vest? Do you have one?"

"Yes, but..."

"No buts, Carson. I've done two tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. I'm not just a good shot, I'm a great one."

"When you were on the target range..."

"I was concerned my weapon might have been knocked out of alignment during my move. It had been. I've corrected that."

He pulled up behind Jesse in front of the suspect's house. AJ jumped out of the car and went to the trunk of his car. He popped the trunk and she grabbed two vests, handing him one. He'd never seen her like this. He put on his vest and watched as she secured hers. He took her by the shoulders and made sure it was secure. Before the look she was giving him turned into an argument he leaned close. "Indulge me. I just found you. I don't want to lose you."

Her face softened in the moonlight. "Ditto." Then she turned back to the Major. "Okay, let's finish this." She followed him to the make shift command center.

"What have we got?" asked Jesse.

"We got a camera set by the front window. Fred's smacked his wife around but she's covering the kids as best she can."

"Chrissy's always been a good mom, just lousy taste in men." He looked at AJ standing next to John. "You all know Sheriff Carson. This is Major Cooper."

One of the men looked her up and down. “No offense ma’am but we don’t need anyone to hold Fred’s hand.”

AJ looked unmoved. “I’m not here to hold his hand, deputy. I will, however, blow it off if necessary.”

“I’ve been trying to talk to him but he’s got enough beer in there to supply a bar and he’s waving a gun around.”

They looked at the computer screen that was set up in the back of a cruiser. A flexible camera had been set up. They could see Fred wandering around and ranting but they couldn’t hear him. “He probably cold cocked his wife with the gun,” said AJ. Everyone looked at her. “He wouldn’t have hit her with his fist while he was holding the gun. This is a guy who intends to use it.”

John looked at her and nodded. “She’s right.”

“You sound like you’ve seen this before,” said Jesse.

“More times than I’d like.” She looked at the side of the house. “Can someone get his attention while I get on that side of the house. There’s a side window.”

John took her arm. “What are you doing?”

“Someone can keep him concentrated on the front of the house. I can get in position. Sheriff Begay, if I get a shot do I have your permission to take it?”

“AJ, I don’t know,” said Jesse.

“Yeah, you do. Look at him. He has no intention of getting out of this alive and he’s going to take his family with him.”

“Jesse, are you nuts?” said one of his deputies. “You’re going to let this little girl do our job?”

Jesse turned to the deputy. “Carlos, how long have you been at this?”

“About ninety minutes.”

He turned back to AJ. “Can you really stop this without hurting the hostages?”

“Yes I can. Once I fire, rush the front door and get the hostages out.”

Jesse sighed. “Take the shot. Carlos give me the bullhorn.” The deputy complied. “Fred, this is Jesse Begay. Let’s settle this.”

John grabbed AJ’s arm as she tried to move. “I’ll have your back.” She nodded and moved off in the darkness.

Fred screamed out the screened window. “I’ll settle this alright. I hate this shit. My boss fired me after ten years. Ten years! Snot nose kid. What does he know?”

AJ took a position by the side window. Chrissy noticed her and AJ put her finger to her lips. She moved her hand to indicate Chrissy should lean back against the couch and her children. Fred was in full rant, screaming out the front window. AJ took a deep breath and blocked out everything but the target. He raised his hand with the gun and screamed, “Snot nose kid. What does he know?” AJ fired. Fred screamed and fell to the ground. The deputies rushed through the front door and pushed the gun away from Fred, who was still screaming. Two other deputies ushered Chrissy and the two children out of the house to a waiting ambulance. AJ caught Chrissy’s eye as she was being tended to by an EMT. She mouthed “Thank you.” She turned and saw John was right behind her gun still in his hand. She walked up to him and touched his arm. “I’m okay.” She whispered. They walked up to the command center where everyone was packing up.

“You weren’t kidding,” said Carlos. “You blew his damn hand off.”

“Not exactly,” said AJ.

Jesse looked at her. “Why didn’t you take him down?”

“I would have if I was the only one here but I knew if I shot the gun out of his hand. you and your men would be able to get to the hostages before he could become a renewed threat.”

“You shot the gun out of his hand?” asked John.

“Yes. He may be injured but I didn’t shoot his hand off.”

“Why didn’t you take the shot?”

“Because I knew what I could do and I didn’t think those kids needed to see their father die in front of them.”

They watched as Fred was brought out screaming with his hand wrapped. One of the deputies started toward the only ambulance on the scene and John pointed. “Jesse, that’s not a good idea.”

“Marty are you nuts? Take him to the hospital in your car and when you get there make sure he’s no where near his family.”

“Yes, sheriff.”

Jesse turned to John and AJ and sighed. “They’re good guys but they’re young and they aren’t used to this kind of thing.”

“I understand Jesse. I’m going to have to inform my commander what happened. I’m sure you can expect a call.”

“Thank you for the assistance. Both of you.” He extended his hand to John and then AJ.

AJ started walking toward John’s car. “Are we going?”

“Yes, of course.” John got in the car and started the engine. She waited until they got on the road before she spoke.

“Why are you freaked? Because I just shot someone or because you didn’t?”

“I’m not freaked.”

“Bullshit. You’re freaked.”

John shook his head and pulled over to the side of the road. “The AJ I know is sweet and funny. You’re a beautiful woman and a squared away officer. Who I just saw was a person I don’t know.”

“I guess it’s a little unnerving to know the woman you’ve been sleeping with is trained to kill. John, you and I both have been in these situations before. You have to put

your emotions aside. I analyzed the situation, I knew what I could do with the least amount of collateral damage. Why is it any different because I did the same thing you would have done?”

John sighed and put his arm around her shoulder. “You’re right. You have the same job I do and we do have to separate emotion from the situation. But you’re wrong about one thing. I wouldn’t have done the same thing. I would have shot him in the chest because I don’t have the skill you do. I wouldn’t have given a thought to what those kids would have to go through later. I don’t have the heart you do.” He leaned in closer. “Forgive me?” She smiled and gave him a quick kiss.

“Of course. Now, can we go back to your place? I’m going to have to make an uncomfortable call to my commander soon.”

John pulled out on the road. “Why uncomfortable?”

“Military police do not get involved in local matters, especially Indian affairs. It may go up the chain.”

“Jesse asked for your help and you resolved the situation.”

“That’s the way you see it. That may not be the way the chain of command sees it.”

“Would they have left Chrissy and those kids to fend for themselves?”

“You’d be surprised at what some people would do to follow regs.” She set her hand on his leg. “I’m also going to have to explain how I got involved. Are you okay with that?”

John pulled into his driveway and stopped the car. “Do I mind if your commander knows you and I are together?” He gave her a kiss. “Not at all.”

John locked up the house and they secured their weapons in the gun safe. They stripped down to their underwear and crawled under the covers.

AJ set her phone on the nightstand. “I’m setting the alarm for seven. It’s better he hears this from me.”

He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "Try and get some rest. We have all day tomorrow." He stared at the ceiling and wondered what kind of trouble he would be in for taking part in an operation of Indian land.

The alarm went off and AJ tried to turn it off without waking John. "It's okay," he said. "I'm up."

"I'm sorry, babe."

He gave her a little kiss. "It's fine. I know you need to get this done."

AJ picked up her phone and hit the contact number for Commander Gaines. "Why are you calling me at this hour, Cooper?"

"There was an incident last night and I knew you'd want to be informed. It occurred on the Tohono O'Odham reservation."

"Ah crap. I'm listening."

"There was a man who was threatening to kill his family and himself. Sheriff Begay came by Sheriff Carson's for help. I was here and joined them."

"Indicating that you were at Sheriff Carson's last night and are still there."

AJ rolled her eyes, "Correct, sir."

"What happened?"

"I took a position on the side of the house, behind the suspect. Sheriff Begay and his men distracted him while Sheriff Carson backed me up. When I saw the opportunity I shot the gun from his hand. The deputies rushed the front, secured the suspect and got his family to safety."

"Was anyone hurt?"

"The suspect pistol whipped his wife before we got there. His hand was injured but not badly."

"You really shot the gun from his hand?"

"Yes sir."

"I guess your as good as they say you are."

AJ smiled. "Yes sir, I am."

“You’re not modest.”

“There’s no point in modesty sir.”

“Speaking of which, you’re calling from Carson’s?”

“Sir, I recognize that there might be some issues with military personnel being part of an incident on Indian territory, but there is nothing in the regs that says I can’t be seeing a private citizen.”

“Hardly private. This could come back to bite you in the ass, Cooper.”

“Sir, I’ve never let that stop me from doing the right thing.”

“Fine. Full report in my office by noon, Monday.”

“Yes, sir,” she said to a dead phone. She set the phone on the nightstand and sighed.

“What did he say?”

“He said my relationship with you could come back to bite me in the ass.” She slipped her arms around his neck.

“So am I that right thing?” he asked.

“Yes, you are,” she whispered.

“That’s very good to hear.” He smiled and flipped her on her stomach and bit through her panties.

“What are you doing?” she squealed as he pulled down her panties.

“Fulfilling prophecy.”

They'd spent a relaxing Sunday riding and talking and trying not overthink their relationship. It seemed like everyone was going to have opinion about them. They needed to figure it out themselves in their own time. For now, it was back to reality.

John stopped by the hospital before he went into the office. He saw Jesse talking to one of the nurses. "Hey Jesse."

"Hey John."

"How are the patients?"

"Fred got stitched up and was taken to lock up."

"How's Chrissy?"

"She's good. She's being released this morning."

"Is she going back to the house? Fred's relatives might put pressure on her."

"No. Your girl, AJ found her a shelter for her and the kids. She was here earlier this morning." Jesse smiled. "She's something else."

John smiled. "Yeah, she is." He knocked on Chrissy's door and she smiled despite an eye swollen shut and stitches on her cheek.

"Hi Sheriff."

"Hi Chrissy. I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"I'm good. Major Cooper set me up with some people. It's a safe place for me and the kids until I can get a new start."

"Chrissy are you going to testify?"

"Hell yes I am. He was going to kill my kids. He needs to pay for that."

John reached for her hand. "Good for you. You know if my office can help in any way you let us know."

John left Chrissy's room and headed for the stairs. He stopped and looked out the window at the small town. It wasn't much bigger than it was when he was a kid but now it

seemed very different. He pulled out his phone and looked at the contact picture for AJ. She was sitting on Daisy looking like his dream cowgirl. He pressed the button.

“Hey there,” said AJ quietly. John knew she’d be in her office. “Didn’t I just say goodbye to you a couple of hours ago?”

“Yeah but you’ve gotten a lot done in the mean time. I’m at the hospital. I saw Chrissy. She told me you’d already got her and her kids set up at a shelter.”

“I always keep that information close. Unfortunately I’ve had to use it more than once.”

“In my county?”

“My fort is in your county. If I could discuss something like that, which I can’t, let me remind you of two things. One, the Army has a policy of actively pursuing all domestic abuse cases and they would be tried in a military court.”

“And two?” he said in a huff.

“There is no parole in federal prison.”

“Okay, you got me there.”

“John, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes it feels like I’m dating myself, only a younger, hell of a lot better version.”

“John, I’m not going to say something glib like you wouldn’t look good in my sundress.”

“Thanks, now I have that visual.”

“John Carson you have ten more years experience than I do. You’ve lived here all your life, you know the people, the culture. I’ve been here two months and I feel like a fish out of water when I’m in town. On the fort at least I know what to do and how to behave, out in the world, the real world, your world, I’m lost.”

He could hear the pain in her voice. “Oh, babe, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I came to the hospital and found you had already done everything I would have done. I felt two steps behind.”

“Like Saturday night?”

He hesitated before he admitted it. “Yeah.” He could tell she had gotten close to the phone.

“John, this is not something we are going to solve in a phone call, and I still have that damn report to finish. But...”

Now he could hear her hesitation. “What? Tell me.”

“Meeting you, being with you has been the best thing that’s happened to me in...well...forever.”

John smiled and he felt a weight lift from his chest. “You just like me for my horses.”

“And your cowboy hat. Don’t forget that,” she laughed.

“Can I see you tonight?”

“I’ll stop home and get a fresh uniform.”

“Would you like to go out?”

“No, I’d like to curl up on the couch and maybe watch a movie.”

“Sounds great. I’ll see you later.” He disconnected the call and slipped in in his jacket. He turned to see Jesse standing there with a big grin. He and Jesse had been best friends since they were kids. He braced himself for the ribbing. “Go on. I know you want to.”

Jesse put his arm on John’s shoulder. “It’s about damn time.”

AJ hung up the phone and turned back to her computer screen giving it one final edit. She hit send and the report was now in her commander's email. She knew there was no point in avoiding it so she walked down the hall to Commander Gaines office. His lieutenant buzzed the intercom. "Major Cooper is here to see you, sir."

"Send her in."

She acknowledged the lieutenant as she walked through the commander's door. "Good morning, Commander."

"Not yet. I see your report is ready."

"Yes sir."

"I doubt there will be any deviation from what you told me yesterday morning."

"No sir."

"Including your involvement with Sheriff Carson."

"I stated the facts as they happened."

"Of course you did. It's what you do, isn't it, Cooper?"

"Sir?"

"You are a by-the-book officer. Always doing the right thing."

"Yes, sir," she said flatly, knowing where this was going.

"Even if it means you get sent to the driest, God forsaken assignment."

"Yes, sir."

"Look Cooper, I checked. You have nine months until your retirement. Try not to fuck up my career in the meantime."

"I'll do my best sir."

"Fine, your dismissed."

"Yes sir." She rose to leave.

“By the way, Cooper. Sheriff Begay called me this morning to thank me for your services. He said you analyzed the situation and shut the suspect down quickly. Said you were the finest shot he’d ever seen.”

“Good to know, sir.”

“It’s the only thing that may save both our asses. We’ve always crossed swords with the Indian authorities. You seem to have made an ally in Sheriff Begay.”

“He seems like a good man.”

“He’s also your boyfriend’s best friend. Don’t get your loyalties crossed.”

“No sir.”

AJ went back to her office and took a breath. Gaines wasn’t wrong. So long as she was wearing the uniform that’s where her loyalty had to be. She was going to need some coffee to get through this day. Her corporal was engrossed in his presentation to the commander so she headed to the break room. “Would you like some coffee, Corporal?”

“Oh, I’ll get it Ma’am.”

“No need. Black, right?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Thank you.”

She was grateful for a bit of quiet. Sometimes being alone was difficult even on this post. She wouldn’t change anything she’d done, but sometimes that didn’t make it any easier.

John couldn't wait for AJ to get to his place. He'd bought some nice wine and he'd started the grill for some steaks. Really all he wanted was AJ in his arms. He'd gotten a call from the state office about the incident Saturday night. He wasn't in trouble because Jesse had asked for his help and to quote the DA "his girlfriend had done the heavy lifting." A knock at the door interrupted his dangerous circular thinking.

AJ was standing at the door holding a pressed uniform and an overnight bag. She was dressed in comfortable jeans and an oxford shirt. She'd left her hair down because she knew he liked it like that.

"Hey, let me take that." He grabbed her uniform and hung it in the hall closet. "How was your day?"

AJ closed the door behind her and dropped her bag. She pulled him into a passionate kiss, then wrapped her arms around his waist. "It's better now."

"So is mine but what's going on?" She buried her head in his chest. "Darlin' talk to me."

"It was a rough day." She looked up at him and smiled. "I was thinking about this all day."

"How about I pour you a glass of wine and we relax."

"Sounds like heaven."

"Go get comfortable in the living room." He poured AJ a glass of cabernet and brought it to her. She had kicked off her shoes and was curled up on the couch. He handed her the glass and she took a sip.

"Perfect, thank you."

"Good. Now tell me what happened."

"My commander said basically what I expected. The fact that Jesse called personally to thank him for my services helped. Military police and Indian authorities are known for contentious relations. He said this was the only thing that would save both our

asses. What I didn't expect was he looked it up how long I have until retirement. Nine months. He said to try and not fuck up his career until then."

"Ass."

"I've spent twenty years trying to do the right thing, even when it hurt. But to know after all that they want me gone."

"Not everyone wants you gone. Think about all the people you helped. Think about Chrissy. She was actually smiling when I saw her this morning. She is beat to shit, but she is smiling because you gave her a way out of hell."

She leaned into his chest and he held her tight. "Thank you."

"I'm just telling you the truth."

She looked into his eyes. "You're on my side." She said it as if she found it astonishing.

"Always," he whispered and gave her a light kiss. "You told me about your parents..."

"Woodstock lives..."

"Right," he smiled. "That doesn't say Army to me. How did that happen?"

"It actually started with the shooting. First at camp with archery as a kid. I have this bizarre hand eye coordination. I moved on to shooting and entered some tournaments."

"Why do I get the feeling your leaving something out."

"This is the part where I mention I was the women's national champion at sixteen."

John sat back. "Wow, that's very impressive. Why weren't you going to tell me?"

"Because you seem intimidated by what I can do."

"I'm not..." he stopped "Okay a little. You're an amazing shot. I'm an old man who's feeling a bit outdated."

"You are not old and outdated. You are a wonderful man and a terrific sheriff."

“How are you so sure?”

“The wonderful man or the terrific sheriff part?”

“Sheriff first.”

“I asked around, did my research. It’s all part of coming to a new posting. You’ve been with the department for thirty years, sheriff for twenty five. You run unopposed every election.”

“It’s a small town. Not a lot of competition.”

“Don’t you dare minimize what you’ve done. Especially because of me. You’re a hell of a man, John Carson. Everybody says so.”

He smiled. “Do you say so?”

“Yes I do.” AJ gave him a kiss.

“And the wonderful part?” he smiled.

“Your natural tendency is toward kindness. You don’t go guns blazing into any situation. You’re thoughtful.” She gave him another, deeper kiss. “And a hell of a kisser. So, yeah. You’re pretty freaking wonderful, Sheriff.”

“Thank you. National champion. Very impressive. I’m surprised you didn’t go to the Olympics.” She looked awkward and took a sip of her wine. “You went to the Olympics.”

“Yes.”

“Brought home the gold I imagine.”

“No.”

“No?”

“Silver. But the Russian cheated. That’s a story for another day.”

“You have an Olympic medal.”

“Yes.”

“Where is it?”

“Lingerie drawer.”

“You keep your Olympic medal with your lingerie?”

“Yes the next time you’re at my place I’ll let you rifle through my undies.”

John laughed. “Okay, deal. That still doesn’t say how you wound up in the Army.”

“After the Olympics I wanted to do more with my life than leave holes in targets. I went to college on an ROTC scholarship. I did my tours overseas. I was never a sniper, but I trained a few. They never could quite believe I was a better shot than all of them. Finally I transferred to MP’s and was transferred stateside.” She took another sip of wine. “That brings you to the time where I meet a hot cowboy in a desert town and we are up to date.”

John stood and picked up her empty glass. “Another?”

“With dinner.”

“Okay, you get the salad and I’ll check on the steaks.” John watched from the patio as AJ moved around the kitchen. It all seemed so normal and right. Thoughts of her retirement and how to convince her to stay. She brought out the salads and they sat down at the patio table.

“So fill me in on John Carson.”

“It sounds like you already did your research.”

“No, not the public information. Tell me about little John Carson.”

“I was spoiled rotten by my mother, at least that’s what my father said.”

“No she didn’t. You couldn’t have grown up to who you are if your were spoiled.”

“Well, call it indulged. I was an only child so she indulged me behind Dad’s back. Slip me some extra allowance, stuff like that. I’ve been riding as long as I can remember. I wanted to do rodeo but Mom wouldn’t hear of it. She said she wouldn’t have her only son breaking his neck.”

“So what did you do instead?”

“Played football.”

AJ laughed. “You’re kidding! What position?”

“Quarterback.”

“How many bones did you break?”

“Just two.”

“You’re Mom must have been so pissed.”

“After she stopped crying.”

“She sounds very loving.”

“She was. Dad was a little more reserved but he was a good man.”

“Like father like son.”

“So, I’m dating the big man on campus.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“You were the high school quarterback. This is Texas. Everyone lives and breathes horses and football. You must have had the girls lining up.”

John tried to hide his blush as he remembered a few escapades under the bleachers. “That’s a myth.”

“Myth my ass, Carson. You are blushing.” She took a sip of her wine as he took the steaks off the grill. “So how did your team do?”

“State champs my senior year.”

“Okay I am going to let the parade of girls who threw themselves at their conquering hero go. But if any of them are single now and have any ideas I am not above kicking some ass.”

John laughed. “Alice Jane, are you jealous?”

“Hell yes! We have established the fact that you are my man and I am not above defending what’s mine!”

John about choked on his steak. “Are you sure you weren’t born in Texas?”

“Fine. Move on to college. Football scholarship?”

“Yeah. Went to U of T. First time I ever lived anywhere but here. I got a little crazy for a bit before my coach settled me down. I focused on my studies and football.”

“Criminal Justice?”

“Yeah.”

“You always wanted to come back home, didn’t you?”

“I can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

“When did your parents pass?”

“About twenty years ago.”

“So they got to see you elected Sheriff.”

He couldn’t resist smiling. “Yeah they did.” He sat back in his chair. “What will your parents think of me. I’m closer to their age than yours.”

“Okay, knock that off right now. Diane and Robert Cooper are nearly seventy. They still wear jeans and t-shirts and go to rock concerts.”

“Especially Alice Cooper concerts,” he said with a smirk.

AJ pointed her knife at him. “If you’re expecting to get any tonight I would stop right there.” John laughed and held his hands up in surrender as he started carrying the dishes into the kitchen. “The truth is they will love you. They love people who are what they call true.”

“True?”

“True to themselves, true to others, a good human.”

“And my age won’t be an issue?”

She slipped her arms around his waist. "My parents will be happy that I found someone like you. But my Mom will probably clean your aura and give you crystals for your health."

"I can live with that, so long as you're part of the deal." They finished the dishes and grabbed some water from the fridge. "What movie would you like to watch?"

AJ smiled and took his hand. "I could go for an action flick, preferably with lots of explosions and minimal plot.:

"Sounds great."

She took his hand and led him toward the stairs. "Let's watch in bed. Later."

AJ and John saw each other when ever they could. AJ had gone so far as to leave a couple of clean uniforms at his place. He left a few clean shirts at her apartment. They mostly kept to themselves and loved being able to relax together. AJ laughed until she cried when John rifled through her lingerie drawer and found her silver medal. He put it around his neck and struck a pose. "How do I look?"

In between gasps of laughter she said "Great. Classic Olympian. They were naked too."

They went to dinner occasionally with Jesse and his wife Theresa. They'd had barbeque at Jesse's and Theresa had informed her of some of "the boys" antics as kids. AJ felt comfortable with the Begays and she was settling into her life with John. For the first time she felt like she had a real life, something she'd want to go on longer than her assignment. She started wondering how John would feel if she retired in Huachuca.

Work had been blessedly quite for the last few weeks. The incident on the reservation seemed to have been forgotten or at least ignored and that, she could live with. She was staying late to finish up the never ending paperwork so she could have a relaxing weekend with John. She walked into the break room for some coffee and was followed in by Scott Fleming. He was a fellow Major, in charge of logistics and transportation for the Fort. He was also a jackass. Single, for good reason, he thought he was God's gift to women. She didn't understand why. He was not unattractive but he had the personality of a sea slug. He'd repeatedly asked her out and she always turned him down.

"Well hey there AJ," said Scott. "How's it going?"

"Fine thanks," she said as she tried to get to the coffee.

"I hear your shackled up with the Sheriff."

She turned and shot him a glare. "I'm just here to get some coffee."

"I can't believe you're giving it up for that old man when you could have had this," he said indicating himself with both open hands.

"Let it go, Scott." She tried to get to the coffee and he grabbed her arm.

“He’s buddy-buddy with that Indian cop. You should stay with your own kind, AJ.”

AJ threw off his hand. “Scott, I’m going to do you a big favor. I’m going to forget what you just said. Now go away and leave me alone.” She tried to keep her hand from shaking as she reached for the coffee.

“You just need to see what a real man can do.” He grabbed her and threw her on the break room table, pinning her arms so she couldn’t get to her side arm. He held his arm across her chest and got the gun out of her holster. He threw it across the floor and smiled. “We’re going to have some fun.” As soon as he pulled back to undo her pants she scratched his face as hard as she could. “You bitch!” he screamed as he punched her in the face. Pain shot through her but she tried to focus. “Always the big shot. Major Olympics! You’ll pay for this. He backed up just enough for her to drive her foot into his crotch. He screamed and fell to the floor.

AJ scrambled off the table and found her gun. The last thing she would do was run and give him a chance to shoot her. She held her gun on him even though her eye was blurred with blood. He made a move toward her. “Don’t make me shoot you, Scott. Even like this I’m still a better shot than you.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

She shot the floor within a half inch of his foot. “Yes I would.” She picked up the wall phone and call for backup. The two guards on late shift ran into the room with their guns drawn. They looked back and forth between AJ and the officer on the floor. “Arrest Major Fleming. Charges are assault and attempted rape.” They cuffed the still screaming Scott who was now threatening the men doing their duty. One of the men, Corporal Matlin replied “Shut up, sir.” He quickly looked at Sergeant Lyons, for reproach, but he just nodded. Lyons picked up the wall phone and called for EMT’s.

“No, I’m okay. I want to go home.”

Lyons took her gun from her shaking hands and set it aside. “You know the regs, Major. We have to call them.”

“You better. That bitch attacked me,” screaming Fleming.

Lyons looked at the bleeding Fleming, still curled up in the fetal position. “Shut your mouth, sir.”

The EMT’s came and started tending to her wounds. AJ looked at Lyons. “Please secure my weapon. You’ll have to test it. I fired a warning shot into the floor.”

Lyons nodded. “Yes Ma’am” He leaned in and whispered, “ I wouldn’t have shot the floor.”

AJ tried to smile but was beginning to shake. “Major, look at me.” She squinted at the EMT’s pen light. “Okay, let’s get them over to the hospital.” She grabbed the EMT’s sleeve. “I need John, please call him. I’m late he’ll be worried.” She thought she saw Lyon’s nod before she passed out.

AJ woke to bright lights and angry voices. “Where is she?” Through her haze she realized it wasn’t John. Commander Gaines pulled back the curtain and stopped. “Jesus,” he whispered. “The doctors say you’re going to be fine. Just some stitches and some rest.”

“Fine,” she whispered. She didn’t think she’d ever be fine.

“You really are a magnet, Cooper. Trouble seems to follow you everywhere.”

That snapped her to reality. “Are you saying I deserved this? Would your wife have deserved this, your daughter?”

“No of course not, but if you pursue this you are going to have an angry mess on your hands. Fleming is a good officer with a clean record.”

She just stared at him, not believing what she was hearing. “Where is she?” she heard. She smiled knowing that was John. He came around the corner and stopped dead.

“Jesus Christ, who did this to you?”

“Calm down, Sheriff. We have everything under control.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

“I am Commander Gaines and I am the ranking officer at the post.”

“Good for you. I’m Sheriff John Carson of the county your standing in.”

“Sheriff, please lower your voice. The inquiry into the assault is underway.”

“Assault?” she thought. She put her hand to her cheek and realized her wound had opened again. Her hand was smeared with blood. “Commander,” she whispered. He came closer and she grabbed his class A uniform with her bloody hand. “That bastard tried to rape me. If you don’t prosecute I will scream so loud and so long you’ll never see your pension.”

“Are you threatening me, Major.”

“Yes I am.”

The doctor picked that moment to join the fray. “Okay, Major Cooper. I seen all your tests.” He looked up at her and saw her face was bleeding again. “Oh, I’ll have someone tend to that before I release you. You’re off duty for a week. Make an appointment next week so I can clear you for duty. I don’t want you alone tonight, make sure you don’t have any further issues.

“She won’t be,” said John. He leaned into Gaines and said, “The guy who did this better be in custody and better stay there.” Gaines turned red but was smart enough not to go up against a man as angry as John Carson.

A nurse came in and swabbed her wound and applied some butterfly stitches to her cheek. “Here are your discharge orders and your pain med.”

“I’ll take those,” said John

“Oh, hello Sheriff. Sharon Moore, we met at the carnival.” She handed him the paperwork and the medicine.

“Can we leave now?”

“Yes, Sheriff,” she said, obviously confused at why he was here and why he was being so rude.

“Clothes,” whispered AJ.

“What, baby?”

“They took my clothes.”

Sharon put her hand on AJ’s arm. “I’ll get you something.” She looked up at John now understanding the connection. “I’ll get some scrubs.”

John nodded. “Thank you, Sharon.”

They were finally alone. “AJ, do you want to tell me what happened?”

“I want to go home.”

“Which home?”

“Yours.”

Sharon came back with the scrubs and a bathrobe. She also had some slipper socks that had treads on them. They would be sufficient to get her safely into the car. AJ looked up at her and whispered, “Thank you.”

“Oh, you’re welcome, sweetie. You’ve got a good man to look after you.”

AJ managed a smile and looked at John. “You see, everyone thinks your as wonderful as I do.”

“That’s for sure,” said Sharon. “Do you want some help?”

“No thanks, we’ve got it.”

John tried to focus on the road and not his raging anger. He wanted to find whoever did this and kill them. No trial, no justice, pure vengeance. He pulled into his driveway and helped AJ up stairs.

“Get this off me,” she cried. “She pulled at the pants and groaned in pain.

“Here, let me.” He carefully slid the pants over her hips and down her legs. He tamped down his fury as he saw the bruises on her body. He slipped the top over her head. “I think you have some clothes here but no night clothes.”

“I want one of your t-shirts. They smell like you.”

He got a one of his t-shirts while she slipped off her bra. He helped her put the t-shirt on and pulled back the covers. “Get under the covers and I’ll get you some water so you can take your medicine.” He brought her the water and she took the pain med without question. “Lay back and try and get some rest. I’ll turn the lights out.”

“No, don’t leave me.”

“Okay. Tell me what you do want.”

“Get in bed with me, please.”

She was pleading with him as if he would say no. “Of course, baby. Let me get rid of the boots and some of these clothes.” He stripped down to his boxers and t-shirt. “Is this okay?”

“Yes, please come to bed. Don’t leave me.”

He climbed into his side of the bed and let her curl up on him as she wanted. When she seemed comfortable, he put his arm around her. “Why would you think I’d leave you?”

“I attract trouble.”

“Who said that?”

“Gaines.”

“Bastard. How dare he say something like that to you.”

“It’s true. Bad things happen when I’m around.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it and if you don’t know it I’ll keep telling you until you do.”

“He knew about you.”

“Who, Gaines?”

“Fleming. Another major. He’d asked me out a lot but I’ve always turned him down. He said I needed a real man. That’s when he tried to rape me.” He sat up, trying harder than he ever had to calm himself.

She pulled on his shirt. “Please don’t leave me.”

“Alice Jane, let’s get something clear. I don’t intend to leave you. Not ever. I’ve been trying to figure out how to ask you to stay here when you retire.”

She managed a small smile. “I was trying to figure out how to ask if you mind if I stayed.”

He smiled and he wanted to take her in his arms but he knew how bruised and hurting she was. “Okay that’s settled. You and me, we’re a forever thing.”

“A forever thing?”

“You don’t think I’d wait this long to ask someone to move in with me and think it’s temporary?”

AJ smiled. “A forever thing.”

“Yes, Ma’am. Now lay back. You can tell me what you want, when you want. But when you wake up I’ll still be here.”

She smiled and nodded. They both laid back and she started telling him. How he pushed her on the table and how she defended herself. John hope she’d scratched him deep enough to leave permanent scars. He had gotten her weapon away from her but she kicked him in the balls and got it back. Even through a bloody, swollen eye, she was

able to fire a shot and keep him subdued. He kissed her on the forehead. "You are amazing."

"What?"

"You are so brave. I'm so proud of you."

"I don't feel very brave now."

"You don't need to be brave with me. How do you feel?"

"Scared." She began to sob into his chest until the medicine took hold. John held her as tight as he dared. She wasn't going to have to go through this alone. He wouldn't leave her. They were a forever thing.

John had never been this angry in his life but he knew it was of no use. He had to stay calm and be what ever she needed. Right now it seemed like she all she wanted was the comfort of his physical presence.

He'd called Jesse and Theresa and asked them to come over. They had keys and could let themselves in. The last thing he wanted was for AJ to wake up and not see him. He asked Theresa to get a light breakfast started. He asked Jesse there because he needed his best friend.

They'd quietly let themselves in. Theresa got to work in the kitchen and John stood in the doorway of the bedroom, in the line of sight of AJ. "Jesse, she defended herself despite what he did to her. The Sergeant that called me told me she got off a warning shot only half an inch from his foot."

"That sounds like her," said Theresa as she came upstairs with two mugs of coffee.

John took a long sip. "Bless you. I can't tell you how much I needed this." He looked at her sleeping. "Now she keeps saying don't leave me, like I ever would. I was afraid if I went downstairs to make breakfast it would upset her. I don't know what to do?"

"You're doing it," said Theresa. "Her whole life she's been this perfect person, perfect officer, perfect shot, perfect daughter. But she's always been separate. She wasn't like her parents. Her fellow officers rarely accepted her. She was lonely." She smiled and tapped John's shoulder. "Then she met you. You accept everything about her and you love her for it."

He looked at her and tried to smile despite her wounds. "Yes, I do."

"She doesn't have to be perfect for you. She can let out just how scared she was. You are exactly who she needs."

"Do I smell coffee?"

John looked over and saw AJ stirring and opening her one eye. The other was swollen completely shut. He sat down on the bed and took her hand. "Hey baby, how do you feel?"

“Like I got hit by a truck. Coffee?” Theresa brought in a mug and handed it to her.
“Theresa?”

“I called them to come over. I didn’t want you to wake up and have me in the kitchen.” She looked at him and he knew Theresa was right. He’d done the right thing.

“Jesse and I are going to go fix you two some breakfast.”

John waited until they went downstairs. “I hope it’s okay. I gave Jesse my key to your place so Theresa could pack some clothes for you.”

“Of course it’s okay.” She took another sip of coffee. “I’m sorry about last night. I got a little crazy.”

“Hey, you listen to me Alice Jane. You never have to apologize to me for asking for what you need. I love you. I would do anything for you.”

AJ smiled. “You love me? That goes with that forever thing we talked about.”

“Damn straight woman. I love you and you never have to be afraid of asking me anything.” He took her hand in his. “I would do anything for you.”

“I love you too, cowboy. I’d kiss you but I don’t want to gross you out.”

“Not possible.” He lifted her chin and gave her a soft kiss. “Now, what else can I do.”

“Honestly, I want a shower. Do you think you could give me a hand?”

John helped her get out of her clothes and held back on his rage at the bruises on her legs and back that had turned purple. He stripped off his own clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to help you. Besides, I need a shower too.”

She looked him up and down and smiled. “Damn, all that cowboy goodness and I’m in no position to do anything about it.”

“Oh don’t worry, we’ll make up for lost time. For now, turn around so I can get your back. He was as careful as he could be but he could tell she was wincing. “I’m sorry, baby” he whispered. He lost the tight grip he’d been holding on his emotions and broke down. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

She turned and wiped the tears from his eyes. “I’m okay. Well, I’m not, but I will be. I have you. If I have you I have everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“I couldn’t protect you.”

“Any more than I can protect you when your on the job. But you’re here now when I need you the most.”

They changed into shorts and T-shirts and John helped her downstairs. “I smell bacon,” she said.

“Oh good, you’re up. Breakfast is ready,” said Theresa.

“Thank you for getting my clothes for me.”

“You’re quite welcome. I was getting you some fresh underwear and I saw...do you have an Olympic medal?”

AJ smiled. “Yeah.”

“Holy crap!” said Jesse.

“It’s just a silver.”

Jesse looked at John. “Just a silver? Is she for real?”

John smiled and covered her hand with his. “Yes she is.”

They ate their breakfast and talked about everything but the attack. If it wasn’t for her bruises and swollen eye it would have been a day like any other. Except it wasn’t. She was going to suffer more consequences than the beating and she knew it.

A knock at the door startled AJ. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"No, I'll see who it is." He answered the door and came back with three men from her unit, Corporal Johnson, Corporal Matlin and Sergeant Lyons. Lyons was carrying a large bouquet of flowers.

"Major, are you up for some visitors?"

"Gentleman, please come in." Lyons handed her the flowers. "These are beautiful, Thank you."

"Theresa, I think you'll find a vase in the kitchen," said John.

"Men, this is Sheriff Begay and his wife Theresa," said AJ. The men shook hands with everyone then took seats in the living room.

"Ma'am we are all so sorry for what happened to you," said Lyons.

"Thank you but none of this was your fault."

"We feel like we should have been able to protect you. Everyone knows Fleming was a slime ball."

"There was nothing you could have done."

"There is now," said Matlin. "You see Ma'am, someone was stealing my barbeque." He looked sharply at Johnson who put his hands up and smiled. "No one would admit to it so I decided to set up a camera." AJ gasped.

"What is it?" asked John.

"Tell me you got it," she said.

"Audio and video." Matlin looked down at the floor. "When I heard what happened I checked my camera. I saw what he did."

"You turned it in, didn't you?"

"Turned it in? asked John. "This is the evidence you need to prove what happened. There's no telling what Gaines will do with it."

“Ah sir,” Matlin interrupted. “We turned the original over to command. That’s standard regs.” He pulled a flash drive out of his pocket. “Nothing in the regs says anything about making a copy first.” He handed AJ the flash drive. “We’ve got your back, Ma’am.”

AJ smiled despite the fact that it hurt like hell. She stood and put her arms out. “Nothing in the regs about this either. Bring it in here, men.” She gave each of them a tight hug. “I can’t thank you enough.” She smiled. “And Johnson, stop stealing Matlin’s barbeque.”

Matlin turned to his buddy. “I knew it.”

“Wasn’t me,” he claimed.

AJ laughed. “Oh please, you smell like barbeque at least twice a week and I’ve seen you trying to get brown stain off your sleeves more than once.” She looked at the men from her unit and smiled. “Thank you. All of you. I’ll be off duty for at least a week. I’d like the chatter to be kept to a minimum.

“Yes, Ma’am,” said Lyons. “But we’ll call if there is anything you should know.

“You’re all under orders not to break regs.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“But if we happen to hear something?” asked Johnson.

“You know,” said John “I don’t believe I’ve given you men my card. If you ever have any issues off post, feel free to call me.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” said Lyons. “We’ll leave you be now, Ma’am. We look forward to having you back.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Thank you, all.”

John closed the door behind them and sighed. “We’ve got him.”

“We’ll see,” she thought.

The past few days with AJ had been good. She seemed a bit more jumpy than usual but he thought that was to be expected. Right now she was out feeding the horses. She couldn't ride yet, but soon. She loved being around them, especially Daisy. They seemed to have formed a special bond.

Her eye was now open and yellowing and a lot of her bruises had healed completely. At least the ones on the outside. He'd take a week off so he could stay with her. No one gave him a hard time about it because he never took time off.

She pet Daisy's nose one last time and turned back toward the house. That's when she spotted him staring. "Whatcha' lookin at, cowboy?"

"The prettiest girl in all of Cochise County." He slipped his arm around her waist. "And she's all mine." He gave her a kiss and she pulled him close. She was definitely feeling better. "You know, while we're both off I thought we might talk about moving the rest of your things here."

"We could do that." she smiled. She startled at the knock on the door. "You expecting someone?"

"No. I'll see who it is." He opened the door to the last person he wanted to see, Commander Gaines. "What do want."

"To see Major Cooper. She may live with you but she still answers to me." John started to close the door in his face until Gaines put out a hand. "Stop. We aren't enemies. We all want justice here."

"Commander?" asked AJ. "What are you doing here?"

"I've have some information about the case."

AJ looked at John and nodded. "Let him in." She took a spot on the couch and John sat next to her. Gaines sat down opposite them in an armchair.

"Fleming has agreed to plead to assault and take a dishonorable discharge. He loses all VA benefits."

"Are you fucking..." John started but AJ put her hand on his leg.

“The minimum what for he did is seven years. I want to see him serve every day of it.”

“A trial is going to degenerate into a he said she said, you know that.”

“I’m noticing your not mentioning the video,” said AJ. Gaines looked up, obviously startled she knew about the video.

“A grainy video is not going to help you.”

“It looks pretty clear on our copy. The audio is clear too,” said John.

Gaines paled. “How did you get that?”

“You don’t need to know, sir.” AJ said. “What you do need to know is I want this man charged with attempted rape and assault.”

Gaines shook his head “You can’t just let it go, can you, Cooper?”

“Let me ask you this, Commander. Would you introduce Fleming to your wife or your daughter? Would you leave him alone with them?”

Gaines sighed. “Fine. No one can say I didn’t try. He opened his briefcase. He handed a file to AJ.

“What is that?” as John

She flipped through the pages and closed the file. “It’s the paperwork for early retirement.”

“You’d lose none of your benefits. The doctor will sign off on it. You only have four months left, Cooper. Just sign it and you’re done.”

AJ looked at John and he’d never seen her so angry. They not only wanted the charges to go away. They wanted her to go away too. He smiled and nodded. She knew he had her back.

She threw the file back at Gaines. “You can shove this.”

“Watch it, Major. I’m still your superior officer.”

“You’re not a superior anything. You want me to go away. Well forget it. Once the doctor clears me, I’m going back to work. And I will walk past your office every day of those four months to remind you what a poor excuse of a man you are. Now. Get out of our house. Gaines slammed the door behind him and AJ started to shake.

“What is it? I thought you were amazing,” said John.

“I just told a superior officer to shove it. This could be bad.”

He pulled her tight against him. “ He had it coming. If you hadn’t thrown him out I might have decked him.”

AJ came home from her doctor's appointment and set down her bag. She looked for John and found him on the patio with an ice tea and a report. "Hey can I some of that?"

"Sure." He handed her his glass and she took a deep sip.

"Thanks."

"What about the doctor?"

"He said he wanted me out for another week. I suspected Gaines hand in it but he said "Trust me. Give it one more week."

"Do you trust him?"

"I think so. I don't know why but I think I can."

"Trust your instincts."

"Okay, it looks like I have another week off."

"I have to go back to work tomorrow."

"I was thinking about hiring some movers. The apartment is furnished. There's not much there that belongs to me except clothes and a few Knick knacks."

"That's sounds great, so we have the rest of the day. What would you like to do?"

She leaned in close and smiled. She took his hand and said "Follow me, cowboy" as she led him upstairs.

AJ stirred in John's arms. They were both used to getting up early so he didn't mind her early alarm. "Good morning, sleepyhead," he whispered then kissed her cheek.

"Mmm, good morning," she said as she rubbed her hand on his cheek.

"I haven't had a chance to shave yet."

"Don't bother. I like the way it feels."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," she said as she pulled him into a passionate kiss. He started moving down her body, tickling her with his beard. He didn't know what he liked better her giggles or her moans. He moved down to her legs. He moved up her thighs and took her into his mouth. "Yes, please, baby." It only took a few moments before she flew apart. "Oh God, John," she whispered. She pulled him to her as he slipped inside her. "She whispered into his ear. "My man." He lost himself in her heat and passion.

John watched as AJ got dressed for work. He loved watching her lace up her boots and put her side arm in its holster. "Are you ready for this? First day back?"

"The doctor says I am."

John got out of bed and took her by the hands. "That's not what I asked. I asked if you're ready?"

AJ smiled. "Well there is a naked cowboy in my bedroom so I'm not inclined to go, but I do have to go. Aren't you going to be late to work?"

"That's the upside to being the boss."

"Call me when you can."

"I will."

"I love you, sweetheart"

"I love you too, cowboy."

AJ returned to her office and was surprised to find a small bouquet of flowers in a vase. "They're from the unit" AJ turned around to see Corporal Johnson standing behind her. "We're very glad you're back."

"Thank you, Corporal. They are most appreciated." She sighed and looked at her assistant. "I will go to report to the commander and then you can catch me up on the reports."

"Ah, Ma'am. There's something you should know about that. There's a new commander. Commander Vaughn. Transferred in from Seattle."

"What? What happened to Gaines?"

"Seems he decided to retire," he smiled.

AJ walked down the hall to her new commander's office. What the hell had happened? She nodded toward the lieutenant. Major Cooper to see Commander Vaughn. The lieutenant nodded and smiled, just like Johnson had. It was like everyone was in on a joke except her. The lieutenant buzzed her in and she saluted her new commander. "Major Cooper reporting for duty."

Vaughn returned her salute and indicated she should sit. Vaughn was a not an overly tall man, early fifties and his buzz cut was pure white. She looked around and saw some boxes still unpacked. She noticed a picture of Vaughn and his wife and two teenage children on his desk. He sat down and smiled. "So you're Cooper. How are you feeling? The doctor says your fit for duty but I want to know what you think?"

"I feel fully recovered, sir."

"Good, good." He took a seat and stared at her for a moment. He took a sip of his coffee. "Would you like a cup? I could have the lieutenant..."

"No, I'm fine, sir." He continued to stair at her and she was beginning to feel like a fish in a bowl. "Is there a problem, sir?"

"No problem. I've just heard so much about you that I expected a more...intimidating presence."

“Sir, I’m confused. What’s going on?”

“It seems that you are one of the most respected officers on this post.”

“What?” she asked.

He opened a file in front of him. “Exemplary reports from everyone on the post. Your unit seems to feel that you are the best commander they’ve ever had. Fitness reports excellent straight down the line, with the exception of Commander Gaines. You really pissed him off.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You don’t deny it.”

“No point. I refused to back off on my pursuit of charges against Fleming.”

He looked her in the eyes. “Nor should you have.”

“Sir?”

“Gaines turned a video to the prosecutor, blurry, no sound. Essentially worthless.” AJ sighed. She figured as much. “But then, another copy was delivered to the prosecutor at his home. Clear as a bell, including audio. The entire incident captured on video. Fleming’s lawyer tried to argue that it was an illegal surveillance.”

AJ smiled, “But they couldn’t. It had not been set up to entrap Fleming. It was set up to catch a barbeque thief.”

“Exactly. So Fleming wisely pled guilty and has already been shipped off to Leavenworth to start his fifteen year sentence.”

“What?” AJ grew pale and started to shake.

Vaughn buzzed the lieutenant. “Get me a glass of water.” The lieutenant brought in the water and AJ took a sip.

“It’s over? He’s gone?” she whispered.

“Yeah, he’s gone. So is Gaines. He thought if one of his officers was convicted of attempted rape it would ruin it career.” Vaughn smiled. “Turned out he was right. He altered the video before it was turned in. Since we couldn’t prove he’d done it, he was given the option of early retirement. He wisely took it.”

“But who turned in the original video?”

“No way to be sure but if I had to guess it was someone from your unit. You have a pretty loyal bunch there.”

AJ managed to smile. “That’s good to know, sir.” She looked at Vaughn and realized what consequences had fallen on Vaughn. “But that means you were transferred here from Seattle I understand. I’m sorry sir.”

“Don’t be. My mother lives only thirty minutes from here. I’ve been asking for the posting for some time. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had Sunday dinner with her. You’ve made an old woman very happy. She gets to cook for us, although I think she’s more excited to see her grandkids.”

AJ smiled. “I’m glad it worked out for you, sir.”

“Thanks. I understand you are retiring in a four months.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I wonder if you might reconsider it?”

“Sir?”

“I’ve literally never had an officer so well thought of. Ever since I got here I’ve been hearing Major Cooper this, Major Cooper that. Even the lady at the commissary.”

“Oh, Gloria. She’s a sweet lady.”

“Exactly. You’ve taken the time to get to know people. You’re respected. I’ve read your file. You haven’t had an easy time of it but you never gave up.”

“I appreciate that but I’ve finally made a life for myself outside the Army.”

“Sheriff Carson.”

AJ laughed. "Wow, you are up to date, aren't you? Yes, Sheriff Carson."

"Well, I understand. But I still have you for the next four months. Corporal Johnson submitted an excellent training exercise for dealing with suspects in body armor. I'd like you to make sure it's put into place." He reached into his drawer and pulled out a box. And you can make sure Sergeant Johnson gets this."

AJ opened the box and found the insignia that would promote her corporal. "He's earned this, sir."

John had asked Jesse for lunch at the Inn. He was nervous, waiting for AJ's call. She'd been through enough. He just hoped there wouldn't be too many repercussions when she reported for duty.

"Hey John, what's up?" Jesse sat down opposite him in the booth.

"Why does something have to be up?"

"Because you never want to get together during a work week."

"I'm worried for AJ. It's her first day back on duty."

"She's a tough woman. She's handled an awful lot and I'd say she been doing pretty well. Your problem is you can't fix this for her."

"You're right."

"Of course I am. I'm always right."

John laughed. "I'll be sure and tell Theresa that."

"Don't you dare!" They placed their orders with the waitress.

"Do you know it only took an hour for her to pack her things to move into my place. The apartment was furnished. All she packed were some pictures of her family and clothes, mostly uniforms. Very little else."

"Unusual. I'll give you that. Theresa has a giant cabinet just for her jewelry."

"I asked her about it and she said she'd never been anywhere long enough to accumulate things."

"How is it living together?"

"Good. We have to get used to sharing a bathroom and who's making dinner but it's only operational issues, not structural."

Jesse smiled. "I never thought I'd see the day."

"What?"

“You. Head over heels like a teenager.”

“I’m not behaving like a teenager,” he protested while the waitress set the food in front of them. He picked up his club sandwich and stopped mid-bite.

“What is it?” asked Jesse.

John smiled. “I have a thought.” His phone rang and he saw it was AJ. “Hey sweetheart. How’s it going?”

“It’s great,” she said. “Fleming pled guilty and he’s already been shipped off to Leavenworth. And Gaines is gone too. The new commander seems great. I’ll tell you all about it when I get home. I have to run. The unit put together a welcome back lunch for me. Barbeque!” she laughed.

“That’s great, AJ. I can’t wait to here all about it.”

She hung up and John set his phone down. He took a sip of his ice tea.

“So, how did it go?” asked Jesse.

“Great, everything has been resolved. She said she give me the details when she got home.”

“She still needs you,” said Jesse.

“What are you talking about?”

“John Carson, I’ve known you since we were six years old. I know how you think. You think now she won’t need you and I will tell you flat out that’s bull.”

“I have know idea what you’re talking about.”

“Yes you do. I’m also going to tell you that AJ loves you just as much as you love her. The way she looks at you when you’re not looking, it’s obvious.”

John smiled. “How does she look at me.” Jesse tucked his hands under his chin, batted his eyes and sighed. “She doesn’t do that. Knock it off,” he laughed.

“John you and I are both cops we analyze the facts. And the fact is, she’s crazy about you.”

“I’m crazy about her, Jesse.”

“I know buddy. It’s going to work out.”

Jesse picked up his sandwich. “Eat up. I have some things to do before I go home.”

John looked at the paperwork in the file and hoped AJ would like his idea. He heard her car and she burst in the front door. He left the file on the couch and stood to greet her. She threw her arms around him and gave him a big kiss.

“I take it you had a good day.”

They sat together on the couch and she couldn't get the details out fast enough. How someone in the unit got an unaltered version of the video to the prosecutor. Fleming's plea meant she didn't have to testify. How the new commander seemed to have her back.

“He even asked me to reconsider retirement.”

“What?” asked John as he pushed the file behind him.

“He said he'd never had an officer in his command who had the respect of everyone. He said I was a terrific officer. I couldn't believe he was talking about me.”

“What did you tell him?”

AJ stopped. “I told him no thank you.”

“You did?”

“John Carson do you actually think I'd re-up and risk getting transferred away from you?”

“Well, you have been spent your life building your career. I would understand if you wanted to stay in.”

“I built a career. I'm happy, really happy to go out on a high note, but no way I risk leaving you.” AJ paused and looked at him. “You told me we were a forever thing.”

“We are, darlin. But I wouldn't want to stand in your way.”

“John, I ready to build my life, with you.” She gave him a kiss. “Are we good?”

John couldn't help smiling. “Yeah, we're good.”

“Okay, then will you show me the file you keep trying to hide.”

John laughed. "Yeah, sometimes I forget you're a cop too." He pulled the file out from behind his back and handed it to her. She looked over the papers and then looked at him.

"What is this?"

"It's Daisy's paperwork. When you sign it, that will make you Daisy's owner."

"What? You're giving her to me?"

"I thought it was time you had something that was just yours."

AJ smiled and tears ran down her face. "Oh John, that's so...it's the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me." She gave him a big kiss. "Thank you."

John took a breath and finally said what he'd been thinking about for weeks. "I thought she would make a nice wedding present."

AJ gasped. "Did you just...?"

"Yeah, I just. Alice Jane, could you see yourself married to this old cowboy?"

She threw her arms around his neck. "Yes. Yes I can. I love you so much."

"I love you too."

Four months went by quickly especially when you're planning a wedding. John had invited his soon to be in-laws a couple of days before the wedding so they could get to know each other before the wedding. Now he and AJ were standing at the airport waiting for their flight.

"Will you calm down. They are going to love you," said AJ.

"You keep saying that."

"There they are." AJ pointed and waved at a silver hair couple walking their way. Diane Cooper had long hair bound in a ponytail. She was wearing jeans and a plain red t-shirt. Diane was a beautiful woman, strongly resembling AJ. Robert Cooper had close cropped hair, beard and mustache. He could have passed as a CEO if it weren't for the jeans and the Alice Cooper T-shirt. AJ leaned into John and whispered, "He's wearing that to intimidate you. Don't let him throw you off." She ran into her mother's arms. She turned to her father and he pulled her tight and he gave her a kiss.

"We've missed you, baby," said Robert.

"I missed you both but I'll be in one place now. You can visit more. Mom, Dad, this is John."

"It's very nice to meet you both," John extended his hand to her father. "Sir."

"Ahh, that's makes me feel old. Most people call me Coop."

John smiled. "Okay, Coop"

He extended his hand to Diane but she pulled him into a hug. "Call me Diane."

"He's got a good aura, sweetheart."

AJ smiled and put her arm through John's. "Yes he does."

The ride back to his house wasn't too bad. Diane and Coop caught AJ up on the activities of friends he'd never met. AJ had a special smile he'd never seen and it did his heart good. He helped carry Diane and Coop's luggage to the guest room.

“Oh this is lovely,” said Diane.

“Thank you,” said John.

Diane looked out the window and the spectacular view of the desert. “Really lovely.”

“Mom, the only thing I ask is if you start burning sage you give us a heads up,” said AJ.

Diane looked around the living room and smiled. “No need. This home has known nothing but love.”

“Mom, Dad you have to come see what John gave me.” She slid open the patio door. “Come on.” Her parents followed her to the barn. They had to move fast to keep up with her. AJ moved toward Daisy and pet her long nose. “Meet Daisy. John gave her to me as a wedding present. Actually she was how he asked me to marry him. Isn’t she beautiful? AJ grabbed an apple and cut it in half. She fed both pieces to her horse.

“You spoil her,” said John. “Now I have to give Harley an apple too.”

“Well, hop to it, Sheriff. Your horse is waiting,” said AJ. John laughed and cut an apple in half.

“Could I try?” asked Diane.

“Sure.” He showed her how to hold her hand and Harley took the apple half from her hand. She giggled just like her daughter had the first time she did it.

“Coop, you have to do this,” said Diane. Coop walked over and held out his hand. He smiled as the horse took it.

“AJ since when do you ride?” asked Coop.

“John taught me.”

“She’s a natural. Perfect seat,” said John and caught a look from her father. “In horse terms that means she know how to sit properly and when she rides it like she and

the horse are one.” He looked over at AJ who had her arms wrapped around Daisy’s neck. “Sometimes I think she’s marrying me because of the horse.”

“You know it’s just because I have a weakness for cowboys.”

They eventually walked back to the house and Diane held back, walking with John. “I’ve never seen my girl so happy. She always was content, with her career, her achievements, but this.” Diane’s eyes teared. “This is what I always wanted for her.”

“Diane, I promise to do my best to see she’s always this happy.”

“Oh, I know that. I see it in your aura.” Diane smiled as she walked into the house.

John and AJ put lunch together while Coop and Diane sat at the dining room table. “I told you they’d love you.”

“Your mom seems happy with me but I don’t know about your father.”

“He’s good. Trust me.”

They had a nice, peaceful lunch and they talked about the wedding. “Ah Dad, I’m so glad you’re going to walk me down the aisle but...”

“Don’t worry baby girl. I brought a proper suit. Wouldn’t want to frighten the locals.”

AJ sighed. “Thanks Dad.”

“I brought a lovely long dress,” said Diane. “Don’t worry sweetheart, we won’t embarrass you at your wedding. I’m just sorry you won’t have any more family than us at the wedding.”

“Well, that’s not exactly true. John and I are both only children so we don’t have any family but there’ll be ... what was the last count?”

“I think it was three hundred.”

“John is very well respected. He always runs for office unopposed. He has a lot of friends.”

“And AJ has some very loyal people in her old unit. I think half the fort staff will be here.”

“We’re setting up a tent for the reception. We have a local band. The ceremony will be the only fancy part of the wedding.”

“The caterer makes the best barbeque,” said John.

They finished lunch and Coop stood. “I think I’ll go out side for a smoke.”

“Ah, Dad...” AJ started.

“Don’t worry, baby girl. I know recreational weed is illegal in this state. I wouldn’t put my new son in law in the position of having to arrest me.”

AJ visibly relaxed. “Thanks, Dad.”

“I’ll join you,” said John.

They got comfortable on the patio and John pulled two cigars from a box on the deck. “Try this. They’re pretty good.”

Coop nodded and lit up the cigar. “Very nice. You keep them out here?”

“It’s the only thing AJ has asked of me since she moved in, to smoke these outside. Didn’t seem like too much to ask for.”

Coop looked at him and smiled. “You’re okay, John. I think I like you.”

“Thanks Coop. I think I like you too. You certainly raised a wonderful woman.”

“She is pretty special so if she chose you, well I trust her judgement.” He extended his hand to John.

“Thank you, Coop.”

AJ looked at herself in the mirror and couldn't believe what she was seeing. She'd spent twenty years looking at herself in uniform. Now she was wear a full length satin dress with lace covered top and lace sleeves. Her hair was piled up on her head with loose curls around her face.

"Oh sweetheart, your beautiful."

"Do you think so? It's so different than I'm used to but when I saw it in the bridal shop, I couldn't resist."

"It's perfect," said Diane. "I have something for you." She opened a velvet box.

"Oh Mom. Grandma's pearls?"

"I thought now was a good time to give them to you."

AJ hugged her mother tight. "Thank you," she whispered. "Will you put them on for me."

Diane hooked the strand of pearls while AJ put on the matching earrings. "You're really happy, aren't you baby?"

"Mom, sometimes I look at John and wonder how I got so lucky."

"You deserve to be this happy."

John adjusted his bolero tie and tugged at his vest. He wasn't nervous about marrying AJ. She was the best thing that had ever happened to him. It was the actual wedding. He wasn't used to being in front of so many people unarmed. He wasn't the Sheriff today, he was the groom.

"Calm down," said Jesse as he adjusted his tie in the mirror. "You look very pretty."

"Shut up, jackass," he laughed.

"I just want her to have the perfect day. She deserves it."

"It will be and you know why? Because it's all you're thinking about. You put her first."

"I'm so lucky to have met someone like her."

"Yes you are, and never forget it."

John smiled, "I won't" He reached for his new cowboy hat that went with the new black suit and silver vest.

Jesse patted him on the back. "So let's go do this."

John stood at the head of the aisle with Jesse next to him as his best man. The music started and Theresa walked up the aisle, taking her place as matron of honor. Then he saw her. He thought the music had changed but he wasn't sure. An angel was walking toward him. She kissed her father and took her place next to John.

"John," she whispered. "are you okay?"

"You look so beautiful. Like an angel," he whispered back.

"You look like my cowboy dream come true."

The pastor cleared his throat. "Are you two ready?"

John smiled. "Sorry pastor. Yes, we're ready."

"Yes we are," said AJ.

The Carson wedding would go down in history as the best party in the history of Cochise County. The townies blended with the military and everyone had a great time. John watched as AJ danced with her former commander. The music stopped and John grabbed her hand. "Excuse me commander, may I borrow my wife?"

"Of course, Sheriff."

He grabbed AJ's hand and led her out of the tent and pulled her toward the barn. "John, what are you doing."

"I want a moment alone with my beautiful wife." He took her around the side of the barn and pulled her into a deep kiss. "Ah, that's better."

"I agree but we have several hundred guests on the other side of this barn."

"Mrs. Carson, we could never go back in that tent and no one would miss us."

"Mrs. Carson, that's the first time anyone's called me that."

"How do you like it?"

"I think it sounds great."

"Well, Mrs. Carson it's time to say our good byes if we're going to make our flight."

"What flight?"

"For our honeymoon."

"We never talked about that. I thought we were staying here. I thought we'd just sleep late and ride."

"As lovely as that sounds I have two tickets to Fiji burning a hole in my new suit."

"Fiji?" she gasped.

"I'm told the water's clear blue green and we have one of the huts right over the water."

"That's sounds wonderful. Do you really think they won't miss us?"

“Jesse and Theresa will handle the guests. Your parents have been filled in and your Mom packed a bag for you.”

“You’re pretty sneaky for a sheriff.”

“Sneaky hell. Do you know how hard I had to work to keep this a secret. You’re a cop too and a great one. I was sure you’d find out.”

“I guess I was too busy being a bride.”

“The most beautiful bride ever.”

“You’re prejudiced.”

“Yes I am.” He took her hands in his. “Before we go back in and get lost in the crowd again I wanted to say thank you.”

“For what?”

“For marrying me. For making this old dude so happy.”

AJ’s eyes teared. “You will not ruin my makeup, John Carson. I paid good money to a makeup artist for all this.” She squeezed his hands. “Thank you, for marrying me. Thank you for giving me a life I never dreamed of. Thank you for making me so happy.” AJ grinned when he wiped a tear from his eye. “Now let’s go say our goodbyes. We need to get to that honeymoon so I can show you how you’re not the old dude you think you are.”

They were walking back to the tent when AJ stopped. “I just realized something. I’m not Alice Cooper any more,” she said with a smile.

“Very true. Should I start calling you Alice?”

She thought for a moment and shook her head. “No I think I’ll stick with AJ.”

John gave her a soft kiss. “So will I.”