

Ranger and Karen

By: Kate Simon

Karen Anders sat down in Chief John Callahan's office with her partner, Bill Davis. She'd been with the Santa Clarita police department for twelve years, the last five as a detective. Santa Clarita was a mid size city north of Los Angeles. It had all the advantages of LA with plenty of small town charm. But even Santa Clarita had its share of crime. Today they were updating the chief on what they had on the murder of a local business man, which was exactly squat.

"Good morning," said the chief as he sat down with his coffee. John Callahan was a good man. He'd had a rough time when his first wife died but he recently remarried to Karen's favorite author, Sara Flynn. Now everyone kidded him about his overly sunny disposition.

"Morning, chief," said Karen and Bill.

"What have we got on the Tomlinson case?" asked John.

"Not much. He had to piss somebody off big time to warrant that type death," said Karen.

"I'd call being cut into pieces and left in the desert pissing someone off," said John.

"If it wasn't for the ATV riders he would have been just one more missing spouse."

"What have you got on the wife?"

"We've looked into her and she's squeaky clean. PTA, teaches Sunday School, devoted mother. Too good to be true," said Bill.

"Karen, what's your take?"

"I think she's the real deal. She seems genuinely devastated over her husband's death."

"Okay, we'll work on the assumption she's clear for now but dot the I's and cross the T's. What about Tomlinson? Anything unusual in his habits?"

"His only hobby was he was a biker."

"A president of a bank and a biker? Interesting."

“His wife said once a month he’d go for long ride. He’d leave in the morning and not get back until late at night. When he got back he’d be covered with dirt and sand. She remarked that it killed her washing machine. I did a search in a two hundred fifty mile radius of his home. There’s a biker bar just outside Stovepipe Wells, The Pit, round trip about four hundred and fifty miles. They found Tomlinson’s body, or what was left of it about fifty miles from there.”

“What’s your plan?”

“If we go in and question them they’ll clam up. We need to go undercover,” said Bill.

John looked at him and smiled. “You ride?”

Karen hid her snicker. Bill was a great cop but he was as athletically inclined as department store mannequin. At the police league softball games, Bill was scorekeeper. “No, not Bill. Me.”

“You?”

“Yeah. I ride on the weekends. I’m a member of a group called Boozefighters. My leathers will give me good cover.”

“Karen, are you sure about this?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay but you don’t go in without backup. Bill, I want you parked near.”

“That might be difficult. This bar is in the middle of Death Valley National Park. There’s nothing around for miles. This place is basically a pit stop, hence the name. The Pit.”

“I don’t care. Find something. Take that old camper out of impound and park it. Make sure the AC is working before you go. I don’t want you baking to death before we catch who ever is responsible. Tomlinson was a big deal and everyone from the mayor on down is chewing my ass for a suspect.”

Karen smiled. “Oh we can’t have that. Sara would never forgive me.”

John smiled despite himself. "Alright, Alright. Let me know when you're ready. Get information only. We don't have jurisdiction in a national park."

Another long day and he was not looking forward to it. It seemed like he'd been at this job forever instead of only three weeks. At least the job came with a place to stay. The house in the back wasn't much but it beat the crap out of the local hotel. Serving drinks and breaking up fights was never his career ambition but here he was.

"Yo, Ranger!"

"Hey, Justin. The usual?" Justin came in almost every day. He was a scruffy twenty something with no apparent job. Ranger's guess was he was a low level dealer or thief, or both.

"Yeah."

He poured Justin a beer and went to the pass through to the kitchen. "Burger and fries for Justin."

"Like he'd order anything else," said Charlie.

"Like you could make anything else." The lunch crowd, such as it was, started coming in. He was waiting tables, working the bar and keeping an eye on Justin and his buddies. It didn't take much to set them off. He'd broken up fights more than once. The door opened and he looked to see who was coming in. He couldn't believe his eyes. It was a very tall blonde, close to six feet, in tight bike leathers and carrying a helmet. She took off her shades and his heart nearly stopped. Her bright blue eyes surveyed the room. From the silence, the rest of the customers were reacting the same way as Ranger. This was every biker's dream girl. She walked to the bar and sat down. Okay, maybe this job wasn't all bad. "What can I get you?"

"What's safe?" she asked.

Ranger smiled. "Around here? Not much."

"Including you?"

"Especially me."

"Good to know," she smiled. "It looks like the burgers are popular. I'll have that and a soda."

Ranger poured her soda and walked over to the pass through. "Charlie, burger and fries."

"Damn. Who the hell is that?"

"I don't know but I plan on finding out. Try not to kill her with one of your ptomaine specials."

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered as he went back to his grill.

Ranger looked at the cool blonde sipping her soda. No one like her should be here. He needed to figure out what her story was before the piranhas started a feeding frenzy. "Your burger will be up in a couple of minutes."

"Thanks."

"What are you doing here?"

"Excuse me?"

"Come on, you know you stick out in here."

"I'm almost six feet tall. I stick out everywhere."

"You know what I mean. What's your deal?"

"My deal is I'm riding cross country and I stopped for lunch and gas. What's your deal?"

"My deal?"

"I told you mine, what's yours?"

"I am a bartender in the middle of nowhere."

"What's your name?"

"They call me Ranger."

The blonde extended her hand "They call me Swede." He didn't let go.

"I see why."

“Why do they call you Ranger? Are you a park ranger?”

“No, I was an Army Ranger.”

“So what brings you to the middle of Death Valley?”

“Just passing through, like you.” Ranger was thrown by her smile. Swede was a woman who could turn any man’s head. He noticed too late Justin’s approach.

“Hey gorgeous. Why are you wasting time with this old man when you could be spending time with me?”

She gave him an icy glare. “Go away.”

Justin put his hand on her arm. “Ah come on, sweetheart. I’ll take you for the ride of your life.”

Before Ranger could react, Swede had grabbed Justin’s hand and twisted until he dropped to his knees. “I said go away.” She released his hand and turned back to her soda. She took a sip and smiled. “Is my burger ready?”

Karen tried to stay calm as the obnoxious guy's friends picked him up off the floor. The bartender looked stunned. She was trying to get a read on the guy. He was mid to late forties, judging by the salt and pepper hair and goatee. He didn't appear to be a user. His blue eyes were shiny and clear. She could tell beneath his t shirt and jeans was a fit body. Very fit. She gave herself a mental shake. She was on an undercover operation, not a date.

She smiled as Ranger brought her lunch. She was thinking of Bill in camper. They'd tried to clean it out and make it as comfortable as possible, but there was only so much that could be done. It still smelled like old socks and wet dog. Bill had all the equipment in the camper he needed to keep track of her. He was able to watch and listen to everything around her thanks to her jewelry. Her necklace was a camera and there was a mic in her earrings.

She didn't know how long she would be here. She'd checked out the layout of the bar before she'd entered and it was bigger than they'd anticipated. The Pit was pretty much a one stop shop for fifty miles in any direction. Besides the bar and small kitchen, it had gas and diesel pumps and what could be laughingly called a convenience store section. There things that a truck passing through might need like aspirin, bottled water and munchies. She needed to be able to see who was coming and going on a regular basis. There was no way she could hang out and blend in. Walking into the place she felt like it was feeding time at the zoo and she was six feet of chicken. She needed a reason to stay. She had an idea and thanked God she wasn't wearing a com because Bill was going to flip out.

"How's the burger?" Ranger asked.

"Surprisingly not bad."

"I asked Charlie to leave out the ptomaine."

Karen smiled. "Thoughtful." She popped her fry in her mouth as Ranger got called over to the convenience section. He sold a trucker some supplies and came back to the bar. In between pouring beers he ran to the pass through for food orders. When he finally came back to the bar he refilled her soda.



“So where are you headed?” he asked.

“No where in particular. I’m working my way across the country, just seeing what’s out there. Stopping when I need to. You look like you could use some help around here. I could wait tables for a few days.”

“This place doesn’t make enough to hire help.”

“I’d work for tips and meals.”

“You wouldn’t make that much.”

She looked down at her tight t shirt and then back at Ranger and smiled. “Seriously?”

He snickered. “Yeah, that was stupid of me. Look, these guys can be tough.”

She shook her head. “Again, seriously?”

“Where are you staying?”

“I saw a place in the back. That looks livable.”

“That’s where I’m staying.”

Karen paused for a second. She wasn’t worried about staying with a possible suspect. She was worried about those damn blue eyes. “Do you have a couch?”

“Yeah, but...”

“It’s only for a few days. I’ll make some cash and move on. It will give you a break.”

“Okay, you win. Finish your lunch and get to work.”

Karen smiled and took another bite of her burger, imaging Bill swearing a blue streak.

Karen went into the ladies room and turned on her phone. She hit a contact button and Bill didn't bother to say hello.

"Are you out of your mind!?"

"Hello to you too, Bill."

"Callahan would never approve this. If I call him he'll shut us down."

"Don't you dare!"

"This is crazy. You're going to move in with a suspect."

"We don't know he's a suspect yet and we won't know until I investigate. Are you getting a clear feed off the mic and the camera?"

"Yeah."

"Fine. I'm going back in. Do not break cover unless there's an imminent threat." She hung up before he could argue any more. She walked back to the bar and went behind it. She pulled off her jacket and saw Ranger's eyes dilate. "He's definitely not gay," she thought, then chastised herself, again. It didn't matter who he had a thing for girls, guys or purple unicorns, she had to figure out if he was involved in Tomlinson's murder. He reached under the counter and handed her a pad, pencil and an apron.

"Here you go," said Ranger. "Those two tables over there just came in."

Karen tied on her apron and "Got it."

Ranger watched Swede go from table to table. She looked like she knew what she was doing. Not that the customers would care. She was the only woman in a room with ten men and he had the feeling none of them were a match for her. He still couldn't figure what she was doing here. She didn't look like a typical transient. Living on the road from hand to mouth was not an easy existence. Swede looked too fit. He walked back to the pass through as Charlie pushed an order on the shelf.

“Order up,” Charlie yelled. Swede picked up the plates and took them to the customers. He leaned closer to the pass through. “Who the hell told you to hire someone?”

“I didn’t hire her. She’s working for tips.”

“Yeah, well I don’t like it. Keep an eye on her.”

“Hey, you don’t own the place. You don’t give me orders.”

“You don’t own it either,” said Charlie.

“Yeah, well I’m the one out front. I’m the one who’s got to cover every station. All you do is cook.” Ranger went back to his bar and poured beers. He watched Swede as she chatted up the customers. He couldn’t figure her out. She was chatting and smiling but dodging advances. He watched her as best he could for the rest of the night but he had more important things to do than watch a stacked blonde wait tables. Not more fun, but more important.

Karen helped Ranger close up the bar. Ranger finished balancing the till while she counted her tips.

“How’d you do?” he asked.

She showed him a wad of cash. “Not bad for one day.”

“Holy crap. They’re never that generous with me.”

“Never underestimate the power of the booty.”

“I guess not.” He grabbed the bag of food Charlie had made for them before he left for the night. “Bring your bike around the back and we’ll see what Charlie left us.”

Karen nodded and walked out to her bike. She’d taken her Road Glide Ultra on some long rides but now she appreciated it’s storage compartments. She’d managed to fit in a travel bag with a change of t shirts and underwear. Before she moved the bike she pulled out her phone. “Bill, we’ve closed the bar and I’m going to the house.”

“Did you get anything?”

“Other than some creatively lewd suggestions, not much. The groups that came in today seemed to have a legit purposes. Truckers on regular routes, locals, I couldn’t get a feel for anything.”

“What about truckers on regular routes? Smuggling?”

“It’s possible. I’ll try again tomorrow.”

“What about this guy Ranger?”

“He seems smarter than this place. I get the feeling he doesn’t fit. I’ll check out his place and see if I can find anything.”

“Are you armed.”

“Hell yes.”

“Okay. I’m going to try and get some rest. If you need me in shout into the mic. I’ll have the receiver near me. You yell and I’ll be awake.”

“Sounds good.”

“Be careful.”

“I will.”

Ranger set the food on the small kitchen table. Charlie's chili was surprisingly good. He put out a couple of rolls and waited for his houseguest. He didn't have a handle on Swede. Something about her seemed out of place, and not the fact that she was tall and beautiful. There was more going on with her than she said and he was going to find out before it bit him in the ass. He heard the large bike come closer and then stop. He went to the front door and let her in. She was carrying a small knapsack, small enough to carry a few clothes. Appropriate for someone who was traveling, but he still didn't buy it.

"Welcome to my home, such as it is."

"Thank you."

"Come on. I've got some of Charlie's chili ready."

Ranger poured them each an ice tea. "I don't drink but if you want a beer I could grab you some from the bar."

"No, this is fine, thanks."

He sat down at the table and took a sip of his ice tea. "I don't get you."

"Excuse me?"

"Why are you on the road? You don't strike me as someone with a case of wanderlust, so what are you running from?"

"Why do you assume I couldn't want to explore the country?"

"You don't seem the type."

"I don't know if that's a compliment or not. Okay, how did you wind up here? Your accent says east coast."

He smiled. "You're good. Yes, I'm from Philly. My last assignment in the Army was The Presidio. I stayed put, pretty much."

"No one in Philly to go home to?"

"Not really. Plus I hate the cold."

Swede laughed. "Well you certainly picked the right place."

Karen waited until she was sure Ranger was asleep. Something about this guy didn't sit right. He asked an awful lot of questions instead of trying to get into her pants. She'd gotten comfortable under the covers on the couch in her t shirt and panties. She wasn't worried about Ranger trying anything. He'd already seen what she could do to defend herself. She looked through the living room and found nothing. She walked quietly into the kitchen and saw nothing but a sparsely supplied cupboard. There was only one place left to look and she hoped Ranger was a heavy sleeper.

She carefully opened his bedroom door and peered in. She hoped she hadn't gasped as loud in reality as she had in her head. He was on laying face down wearing nothing but boxers. The guy was ripped. If that wasn't a big enough distraction he had a magnificent eagle tattooed across his back. She gave herself a mental shake and looked around the room. There was a small nightstand but it was too close to the bed to risk searching. She moved to the dresser and eased out the top drawer. She lift up his some shirts and found only more boxers. She heard nothing before she felt the arm go tight around her waist.

"My wallet's not in there," he whispered.

She swept his back leg and he fell back on the bed. He struggled against her but she'd pinned him to the bed. "I'm no thief."

"Then why were you rifling through my drawers?"

"I'm trying to figure out who the hell you are. You're no bartender, that's for sure."

"If you will let me reach in my pillow..."

"Try anything I'll snap your neck."

"I have no doubt you could." He reach inside the case and pulled out a small wallet. "Help yourself."

She opened the wallet and gasped. “Son of a bitch!” she shouted before she tossed it back at him and got off the bed. “I don’t believe it.” There was a picture of a clean shaven Ranger next to the ID. It read, *Thomas Murdoch, Special Agent FBI*.

Ranger flipped on the lights and watched as Swede walked back to the living room. “Tell me why I shouldn’t arrest you for assaulting a federal agent.” She grabbed her knapsack and unzipped a pocket inside the bag. She pulled out a wallet and tossed it to him.

“That’s why.”

He opened the wallet and shook his head. “Detective Sergeant Karen Anders, Santa Clarita PD. You’re out of your jurisdiction, Detective.”

“I’m investigating the murder of a Santa Clarita banker, John Tomlinson. This was the one anomaly in his life. He was a straight arrow banker during the week. On the weekends he rode and once a month he came all the way out here for some reason. I’m here to figure out why.”

“Isn’t it more likely that he’s pissed off some bank customer?”

“You usually don’t chop your banker into bits and toss him in the desert for denying a mortgage.”

“Damn.”

“His body was found about fifty miles from here.”

“That still doesn’t answer the question of jurisdiction.”

“Tomlinson was a big deal in town. My chief is under pressure to come up with a suspect. If I come up with something my chief will contact the locals.” She sat down on the couch. “So why are you here?”

“I’m not at liberty...”



“Cut the BS. I already know who you are.” She touched her necklace and earring. “So does my partner, so unless you want him barreling in here and blowing your cover I suggest you read me in.”

Ranger took a closer look at the jewelry. “Fancy tech for local PD.”

“If your opinion of me and my department actually mattered, I might be insulted. But it doesn’t, so I’m not. Good try though.” She pulled out her phone and set it on the coffee table. “Bill, ring my phone.” Her phone rang and she put it on speaker.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Now you can see Ranger or Tom, or whoever, my partner is close enough to pick up the reception so let’s save time and read us both in. Now, why the hell are you here?”

Ranger sat down next to her on the couch. He had to smile. He wouldn’t mind having someone as scrappy as her on his team. “I’m investigating a gang running drugs and weapons out of The Pit.”

“What have you got so far?” asked Bill.

“I’m pretty sure the drivers are using this place for a pit stop but these are all low level people.”

“Like Justin.”

“Exactly but the problem is it’s a fragmented operation. People only know their immediate connection. I can’t find who’s running the operation.” Swede pulled up a picture on her phone.

“Do you know him?”

“Tomlinson?”

“Yeah.”

“I saw him here last Saturday.”

“That would correspond with our timeline. So who ever killed him met him here.”

“Safe bet.”

“We’re not going to figure this out tonight,” said Swede.

“Since it’s two a.m. how about we all get some sleep?”

She looked at Ranger. “Will I be safe to take off the jewelry? I’d prefer if Bill doesn’t have a recording of my snoring.”

He held up three fingers. “Scouts honor.”

Ranger turned on the gas pumps and came back to the house for breakfast. They didn’t open until eleven so he had time to get to interview tall, blonde and snarky. When he came back in her heard the shower running. He knocked on the bathroom door.

“Breakfast in ten.”

“Great, thanks,” she yelled over the water.

He was setting out the toast when Swede walked out of the bathroom wearing only a towel. The woman was all leg and his towels did little to cover the rest of her. He dropped the plate and it broke. “Damn, woman.”

She looked into the kitchen as he cleaned up the mess. “How is this my fault?”

“You can’t expect me to see you in a towel and not drop a plate. Now go get dressed.” She snickered and went into the living room, grabbed her bag and went back into bathroom. By the time he set out the eggs she was back. At least this time she was wearing jeans and a t shirt.

“Thanks for the breakfast, Ranger. Or do you prefer Tom?”

“Let’s stick with the names we were using. If I start calling you Karen we’ll blow our cover.”

“That’s fine. It really is my name at my bike club.”

“So you’re a serious rider.”

"It's how I relax. That and reading." She took a sip of her coffee. "What about you? Is that a real name?"

"It's a nickname I got at the bureau. Too many Toms. Now I'm used to it."

"So how did you get this assignment? This isn't an FBI setup, it's been here too long."

"You've done your homework."

"Always," she smiled.

"The owner is currently enjoying the hospitality of the government. We gave him a pass on tax evasion while he's staying out of town. He gave me cover as a bartender and manager with the cook and got out of Dodge."

"What about Charlie? What's his story?"

"Local. Not the brightest bulb in the box. Decent cook."

"We both figured Justin for the local dealer. He offered me pills."

"He tried to sell to you?"

"I think it was more of a carnal bribe." She took a bite of her eggs. "There aren't enough pills on the planet for that."

Ranger laughed and sipped his coffee. "So how did you get this assignment?"

"I volunteered. I'm an experienced biker and my partner is, well, not."

"You're not wearing your gear yet so he can't hear you. I take it that's a sore point."

"Bill is a great cop and a great partner but he's not athletically inclined. He's a techie. He's probably deep diving Tomlinson's financials as we speak. So tell me what you've gotten since you've been here."

"We've identified some of the drivers. But when we stop them for moving violations or weigh stations we find nothing. Some how they know what we're doing before we do it."

“What about The Pit’s owner?”

“Martin Crookshank?”

“Crookshank? Really?”

“Yeah, I know,” he laughed. “He had the gas station about ten miles from here before he bought this place. He’s a slippery business man but we didn’t find anything else.”

“Did you sweep this place for bugs?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I have an idea.” Swede grabbed her phone and called her partner. “Good morning, glory. You up?”

“Of course I’m up. Do you mind putting on your gear. I don’t want to have to tell Callahan you got killed and I missed it because you weren’t wearing it.”

“Will do. I need you to do a deep dive on the owner of this place, Martin Crookshank. Specifically, look for any ties between him and Tomlinson.” She looked at Ranger and smiled. “Our host will provide you with his particulars.”

“Born in Stovepipe Wells. Owned a gas station five miles from here before he bought The Pit.”

“From the previous owner?” asked Bill.

“No, it was a foreclosure.”

“Alright. Give me until lunch.”

Karen looked at the lunch crowd and knew she wasn't any further than she'd been yesterday. Ranger was looking her way and she walked toward the bar. He poured her an ice tea. "Thanks."

"Anything?"

"No. You?"

"No. Can you keep an eye on things for a minute? If you don't mind I'm going to take this outside. I need to clear my head."

"Sure, but don't stay out too long."

"Will you miss me?" she grinned.

"This is the desert. That sun will rip the hide right off you."

"Thanks, Ranger. I'll be careful. I like my hide right where it is."

He gave her a lopsided smile that made her heart skip. "So do I."

Karen grabbed her drink and went outside. A lonely desert oak provided a small bit of shade. She looked around and wondered what the hell she was missing. It was a small parking lot but it butted up against a desert that went on as far as the eye could see. Tomlinson had some sort of connection here. She just didn't know what. Hopefully, Bill would find something. She saw the back door open and watched as Charlie propped it open with a trash can. He lit up a cigarette and took a deep pull. He spot her and nodded. One of the drivers came out of bar and jumped in his cab. Instead of backing out her drove straight through the parking lot, into the desert and did a wide circle back to the highway. She picked up her drink and went inside.

She went back into The Pit and shook her head. The place was aptly named. The place was only barely passable for any health inspection. The place hadn't been painted since it was first constructed. She was on her way back to the tables when she felt her phone buzz. She looked down at the screen.

*On to something. Will let you know.*

She smiled and went back to her tables.

Ranger set out some steaks on the counter and started putting together a salad. The food Charlie made was passable but he needed something more substantial. He'd rather it just be him and Swede but her partner would be joining them. He'd told her to have him park his camper behind the bar. He could plug in and enjoy his air conditioning. The best Ranger had here were fans.

Swede and Bill sat down at his table and he placed salad on the table. "So did you get something?"

"Yeah," said Bill. "but first things first." He pulled out a device and set it on the table. He flipped a switch. "Now we can talk."

"The place was swept."

"And yet they still know every move you make."

"Easy, Bill. Agent Murdoch wants the same thing we do."

"Yeah, okay. The foreclosure sale went through a number of shell companies but I traced it back to First National. That was Tomlinson's bank. Also, how did your people miss that Crookshank was broke before he bought this place?"

"He sold the station and bought this place with the proceeds."

"He sold the station for twice what it was worth and got a killer deal on the mortgage for this place." Bill smiled and looked at Swede. "I would think the FBI would have better game than this."

She looked at Ranger and smiled. "Ignore him. He knows he's the best and he doesn't mind flaunting it."

Ranger smiled and nodded. "So Crookshank is running this? I don't think so. He's not that bright."

"No, I don't think so either. He's just the front. Tomlinson had no prior connection with Crookshank or this place. So it wasn't like they were long lost friends."

“And he couldn’t have killed Tomlinson because he’s been guarded by agents twenty four seven for the past two weeks.

“So Tomlinson set Crookshank up in business because this place is the perfect location,” said Swede. “So who killed Tomlinson and why?” asked Swede.

“I don’t know but I’m going to call my people and make sure they have a tight rein on Crookshank.” He contacted the agent in charge of Crookshank’s detail and made sure that he hadn’t been out of their sight. He finished grilling their steaks and sat back down at the table. “We better turn your device off. If we are being bugged and they can’t hear us for too long we’ll be blown.”

“He’s right, Bill.”

“Fine,” he said grudgingly as he turned off the device.

They finished eating and Bill returned to his camper. Ranger started clearing the dishes as Swede pulled a notepad out of a drawer. She grabbed a pen and wrote.

“I have an idea.” Then she drew two tractor trailers and an double headed arrow between them. She leaned close and whispered, “What if this is where they’re swapping trailers?”

“Parking lot’s too small.”

“The desert’s not,” she smiled. “I saw a driver go through the parking lot and drove around back to the road.”

He pulled back and looked at her. “Damn.”

Ranger looked at Swede and wondered if she'd like to work for the FBI. For that fact, they could use that snide partner of hers. He had to admit the man had crazy good skills. He needed to talk to her but they were being careful. He'd suggest a walk but it was after dark and the desert had all manner of critters he'd rather not encounter. He started looking around the kitchen and Swede realized he was looking for a bug. He stopped and looked at her, shaking his head. Then it hit him. What was the one thing he didn't scan and he always had with him? He picked his phone off the counter and showed it to her. She rolled her eyes and nodded.

"So, did you like the dinner?"

"It was excellent, thank you." She picked up her phone and set it next to his. He didn't know if it was bugged but they couldn't take a chance. "You could replace Charlie."

"No thanks," he laughed. "Charlie can have it." He motioned to the bedroom. He hoped the closed door would allow them to speak. She looked and nodded. He decided if someone was listening, they'd get an earful. He nodded toward the phones as he approached her. He leaned in and whispered. "Let's put on a good show." She smiled. "So, how long are you planning to stay?" He slipped his arms around her waist. He didn't think they were watching, but it seemed like the natural thing to do.

"Long enough," she said before she slipped her arms around his neck and pulled him into a kiss.

He pulled back and looked at her. He knew this was just for show, but damn. He pulled her tight against him and deepened the kiss. Anyone listening could have heard their rapid breathing. They could have heard it without a bug. He looked at her and smiled. "How about we take this into the other room."

"Excellent plan. That couch is lumpy."

He laughed as he led her into the bedroom and closed the door behind them. "Well played, detective." He spoke quietly, not knowing how far the range of the bug.



“Thank you. Who said police work couldn’t be fun?” She shot him a wink. Damn this woman was going to try his resolve. “Seriously, I hope this bed is better than the couch.”

“Not by much. I wanted to talk to you.”

“Is that all?” she grinned.

“Cut me some slack, detective.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just messing with you.”

“There’s got to be a contact in the bar. Someone who’s, if not directing the operation, at least relaying the orders of who ever is in charge.”

“And the person who ordered my banker sliced and diced.”

“Exactly. I’ve called in searches on several drivers but they always turned up nothing. Bugged phone would explain why. And since I was too busy running the bar, I didn’t see something as obvious as truckers swapping trailers.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. I saw the truck turning in the desert earlier but it didn’t occur to me until now about the swap. You also didn’t have Tomlinson. I would have looked at this lot and saw the same thing you did. A bunch of low level flunkies who didn’t have enough game to come up with a decent pick up line.”

“Were you disappointed?” he smiled.

“God no. The hard part was not laughing in their faces. Look, it’s late and we’re both tired. Let’s get some sleep and we’ll figure this out in the morning.”

“Good idea.” He watched as she pulled off her jeans. If the most impressive pair of legs he’d ever seen weren’t bad enough, she pulled a maneuver with her bra he’d seen only in a movie. She unhooked it without taking off her t shirt, then pulled the straps over her arms. She pulled the loose bra off through the arm hole and tossed it with her jeans. “What are you doing?”

“You don’t expect me to sleep in my jeans do you? And sleeping in an underwire bra? Please. That’s definitely cruel and unusual punishment.” She pulled down the bedspread and got under the covers. “Well? Are you going to join me?”

“Ah, damn,” he muttered and pulled off his boots and jeans. He thought for a moment, “Two can play that game” as he pulled his t shirt over his head. He was rewarded with Swede’s flushed cheeks. He smiled as he joined her in bed and pulled the covers over his shoulders. “Good night, detective,” he said turned out the light.

“Good night, special agent.”

Ranger stared at the ceiling. It had been tough falling asleep with Swede next to him. But he woke when he realized she was now curled up against his chest. He debated whether he should wake her. It would be the right thing to do. But it had been a long time since a beautiful woman had slept in his arms. He put his arm around her shoulder and she cuddled into him like a kitten. This was killing him. "Karen," he whispered.

"Huhhh?" she moaned.

"You need to wake up."

"Not yet," she whispered and put her arm around his waist.

He listened to her breathe. She was still asleep. "Karen, wake up."

Her eyes fluttered open and she looked up at him. "Mmm. What?" she murmured. He saw the moment when she realized what she was doing. "Oh, Christ. I'm sorry."

"It's okay but you were testing this scout's honor."

She pulled back to her side of the bed. "What?"

"Scout's honor? I promised to behave and you'd be safe with me." Even with only the moonlight, he could see her smile.

"Even if you didn't behave, I know I'd be safe with you."

"Karen, you're killing me."

"Do you think this is easy for me? I'm in bed with a hot, ripped man and I'm keeping my hands to myself. Well, at least awake I am. Sorry, Tom."

"You called me Tom."

"You called me Karen."

"I didn't think you'd wake up to hearing Swede."

"Probably not. Is there anyone who's going to kick my ass for being in bed with you?"

He chuckled. "You mean other than your partner? No. What about you? Any of those biker friends of yours coming after me?"

"No."

"Okay." He rolled over on his side. "So you think I'm hot."

She laughed and pushed on his chest. "Shut up."

"Is it so hard to say?" he grinned. "I certainly think you're hot."

"Oh yeah?"

"Oh please. Any man would have to be dead three days not to think you're hot." He leaned closer. "You're probably the most beautiful woman I've ever met."

"Only probably?" she smiled.

"Shut up," he whispered before he kissed her. He pulled back smiled. "That's better."

"Yeah, it is," she whispered just before she pulled him to her.

Ranger got out of the shower and looked at himself in the mirror. What the hell was he thinking? He had sex with a colleague during an undercover operation. His bosses would have his ass for this. He spit out his toothpaste and smiled. "Totally worth it."

He walked back in the bedroom and found Swede curled up in bed. "Hey, lazybones. The shower's all yours." She rolled over and smiled.

"Good morning, Special Agent Murdoch."

"Good morning, Detective Anders. The shower's free." She got out of bed, naked, and his heart raced. She was as beautiful in daylight as she was in moonlight. "Dear God, woman. How am I supposed to focus?"

She slipped an arm around his neck. "What makes you think I can focus?" She ran a finger over his chest. "I never got a close look at your ink last night. Very nice." She pulled back and looked him up and down. "Very nice, indeed." She ran a finger around the edge of his towel. "How much time do we have?"

He ripped off his towel and pushed her back on the bed. "Enough."

Ranger watched as Swede pulled on her jeans over the 32mm tucked in her boots. She looked down at the slight flair.

"Can you tell?" she asked.

He looked at her and smiled. "Sweetheart, trust me. No one is looking at your ankles."

"Cool. Let's get some breakfast." She reached for the door but he grabbed her hand.

"Karen, last night..."

"And this morning," she grinned.

"And this morning. It's not something that...ah damn, I suck at this."

“Yeah, you do,” she laughed. “Look, Tom, I have no regrets about this and I hope you don’t. I knew what I was doing.” She looked at him and grinned. “You sure as hell knew what you were doing.” Ranger chuckled when she growled. “So, are we good?”

“Yeah, we’re good.”

“Good. Now let’s go catch some bad guys.”

Ranger watched Swede work the tables as he tended the bar. He had to try something or they’d be in The Pit forever. He nodded to Swede that she should join him behind the bar. She did and he got close and whispered in her ear, “Just go with it.” He kissed her neck and she ran her hand up his arm.

“What are you doing?”

“Forcing someone’s hand. I’m going to tell Charlie we’re taking a break.” He walked to the pass through and Charlie was grinning from ear to ear.

“You got with that?! Holy shit, dude!”

“Shut up, Charlie. We’re taking a break. Cover the tables.” He walked away to the sound of Charlie’s chuckles. He took her hand and walked her outside.

“You realize this is the best gossip they’ve had in forever,” said Swede.

“I know. I want them to be focused on that so we can talk. They sat down under the desert oak and he put his arm around her shoulder. He leaned in and kissed her neck, knowing full well they had an audience. “I see you’re wearing your tech so I assume Bill is listening.”

“And losing his mind, no doubt.”

Ranger leaned close to the earring where the microphone was located. “Bill, do a deep dive on Charlie. You’re clearly better at it than we are. He’s the only one besides me who’s here every day. It’s Wednesday so I expect a trucker named Cavanaugh will be in. Charlie said he’s a regular. I’m going to use my phone to call in a stop and search on him.”

“The phone,” said Swede. “Bill doesn’t know about the phone.”

“We think they’ve tapped my phone. See if you can trace it remotely.”

“So if you call it in, and Cavanaugh switches out his cab we know he’s been warned. Bill, see if you can slip a tracker on the trailer. That way we’ll know where it goes.” Her phone buzzed and she looked at the text.

*Anything else? How about find Jimmy Hoffa while I’m at it!*

They both chuckled. “He bitches but he really is the best.” She raised her hand to his cheek and gave him a kiss.

“Nobody’s watching,” he said.

“I know,” she smiled.

Karen heard the truck pull in and waited for the driver to come in. A dark haired man in a greasy t shirt and jeans came in.

“That’s Cavanagh,” whispered Ranger into her neck and consequently to her partner.

She went over to his table with her pad. “Hello. Do you need a menu?” She cringed at his smile.

“Well, who are you, sweet thing?”

“I’m Swede. Do you need a menu?”

“Only if you’re on it.”

“Clever. Burger and fries it is.” She turned to put in his order and the incredibly stupid man smacked her ass. She swept her leg under the man’s chair and flipped him on his back. “You can apologize with a healthy tip.” The few men in bar hooted while Cavanagh picked himself up off the floor. She walked behind the bar and poured his soda. Ranger came up from behind her.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

He slipped his hands around her waist. “You sure I can’t kick his ass for you?”

“I already did,” she chuckled. She leaned into his ear and whispered, “I’ll go outside once he’s served so I can talk to Bill.”

Fifteen minutes later she was sitting outside with a soda. She sat with her back facing the window and called Bill. “Did you get the tracker placed?”

“Of course and what is this crap I’m listening to?”

“Bill, calm down. It’s a good cover to talk privately. Now what have you got on Charlie?”

“Not much. He’s just as ordinary as he seems.”



“What about his friend, Justin? The one Ranger identified as a low level dealer.”

“Do you have a pic?”

“Yeah, forwarding it now. Bill, check them both. We missed a connection before. Expand your search on both of their circles. There’s got to be a connection between Tomlinson, Crookshank and someone at the bar. These are the closest thing we’ve got to regulars.”

“Yeah, I’ve got it. Look, Karen, are you and this Ranger guy...”

“Special Agent Murdoch and let it go, Bill.”

“You’re my partner. It’s my job to look out for you.”

“I appreciate it, Bill. Really I do. But I’m a big girl. I know what I’m doing.”

“Are you sure?”

She hung up the phone and walked back into the bar. Ranger looked up at her and gave her that damn lopsided smile. “No,” she thought. “I’m not sure at all.”

Ranger called Swede over to the bar. Karen. He'd never met anyone like her. Smart, strong, passionate. He had to stop thinking of her like that or he'd blow the operation. She came behind the bar and moved close.

"Did you make the call?" she whispered.

"Yeah. Cavanagh will be stopped at the next weigh station."

"Hey Swede, can I get some service?" They looked over and Justin was sitting at a table.

He pulled her close. "Be careful."

"Always," she smiled. She walked over to Justin's table. "Let me guess, burger, fries and a beer."

"Charlie says you and Ranger are doin it."

She got closer and hissed, "You and Charlie should take care of your own business."

"Oh we do, sweetheart. We do. You should see my business," he laughed as he grabbed his crotch.

She leaned close and growled. "You're pushing your luck, little man." She turned to walk away when Justin charged her. Ranger was halfway to them when Swede caught him square in the nose with the heel of her hand. Blood exploded over his shirt as he screamed.

"You Bitch! I'll kill you!"

Ranger pushed Swede aside as he flattened Justin. He started to pound on him when Swede pulled him back.

"No, stop!"

He looked up and she shook her head. He stood up and pulled Justin to his feet. He looked at his buddies. "Go clean him up and get him out of here."

"I want that bitch arrested!" Justin screamed.

Ranger grabbed him by his greasy shirt. "She's only thing that's saving you from me beating you to death." He pushed him back towards his friends and walked behind the bar. Swede had already grabbed some ice and wrapped it in a bar towel.

"Here, let me," she said as she took his hand and held it to the ice. "Are you okay?"

He pulled her into a hug. "No, I'm not. I saw red when he tried to hurt you and I probably blew the operation." He brushed her cheek with his hand. "I couldn't bear to see you threatened." She smiled and gave him a soft kiss.

"We'll work it out," she said.

"No, we won't," said Bill, who was now sitting at the far end of the bar. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I was thinking I wouldn't let her be attacked," said Ranger.

"Not you, her."

"Everyone has their limits, Bill. Even me."

"Yeah, well that's moot now. I tracked the trailer. It was switched out fifty miles from here. The guy you stop will be clean."

"Can you transmit the data to my people?"

"Don't insult me."

"Beg pardon. I'll call my people."

"About that. Your phone is tapped as we suspected but there's no bug."

Ranger glanced at Swede. "So they can't hear us unless I'm on it."

"Correct."

"Now before anyone accuses me of burying the lead, I found the connection between Justin, Charlie and the operation. They're cousins."

"What?"

"They have an aunt in common. Lois Hubley."

“Why do I know that name?” asked Swede.

“Because it’s the maiden name of Lois Tomlinson.”

“Shit!” she replied. The front door of the bar was kicked open and Justin was standing there with a 9mm.

“I warned you, bitch,” he cursed before he fired.

Ranger pushed her out of the way and took a round in shoulder. He pulled Swede to the floor as he heard a return of gunfire. He waited a moment before he heard Bill yell.

“Clear.”

He pushed himself to feet and grabbed his 9mm from under the bar. Swede and Bill followed him into the kitchen where they found Charlie hiding in the walk in fridge.

“Don’t shoot me!” he cried.

“We’re not going to shoot you,” said Ranger as he leaned up against the wall.

“Tom! You’re hit!” she yelled. “Bill, call 911”

“Let me secure this one first.” He reached behind his back and pulled out some hand cuffs. He clipped it around Charlie’s wrist and against one of the of the metal racks.

“You’re all cops?! We knew about him. Since when do cops look like her?”

Swede whirled on him. “You do not want to try my patience right now.” She put her arm around Ranger’s waist and helped him out of the fridge. “Sit.” She grabbed a roll of paper towels and pulled some off. “These are probably cleaner than any towels.”

“Guaranteed,” he groaned as she put pressure on the wound.

“Locals are on their way,” said Bill.

“What about Justin?” she asked.

“Dead.”

The three of them didn’t speak. They knew what it meant. Meant to the case and meant to Bill. No matter how justified a shooting, taking a life had a cost.

“Look, I’m going out to wait for the locals and keep the witnesses in place.” Bill nodded at Ranger. “I told them to send the ambulance for this one.”

“Thanks, Bill. For everything,” she said. She walked over and gave him a hug. “Now go make sure we don’t lose the witnesses.” She turned to him and smiled. “Well, that was dramatic.”

“Yeah. I could have done without the bullet.”

She touched his cheek. “I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t shoot me.”

“No, but I’m the one who pissed Justin off. I lost my temper. It was unprofessional and it got you shot.”

“My knocking him down and beating the crap out of him didn’t help. Let’s table this until we get the suspects in jail and this bullet out of my shoulder.”

“Okay, but one thing.” She gave him a short but passionate kiss. “Thank you for pushing me out of the way. At that angle, he would have killed me.”

He smiled and slipped his arm around her waist. “I couldn’t have that. You know the paperwork would have been a bear.”

“Shut up,” she smiled as she leaned in to kiss him. “Oh, and I think you can start calling me Karen.”

Tom stood outside the locals interrogation room. His wound was a through and through. It hurt like hell but he didn't spend weeks undercover to miss this. They'd held Charlie for twenty four hours until everyone could be there. Karen stayed with him at the hospital. He hated the sling but she'd insisted. He wasn't sure what they were doing yet. They needed to figure out this case first. Vince Braun walked toward him. Vince was a part of his team and his back up on this investigation. Karen and Bill walked up the hall. The only one wearing a suit was Vince. The rest of them were still in jeans and short sleeve shirts. The only thing that said who they really were, were the badges hanging from their hips.

"Vince, this is Detective Bill Davis and Detective Sergeant Karen Anders, Santa Clarita PD. This is Special Agent Vince Braun."

Vince reached out to shake both their hands. "You two are way out of your jurisdiction."

"Ease up, Vince. We would have never pieced this together without them. So let's skip the pissing contest. What did you get from the trailer stops?"

"Like you said, your man Cavanagh's trailer was clean. He swapped out with a guy named Turner. We stopped him and found enough coke to buzz half of LA." Vince smiled. "Five hundred pounds."

"How much?"

"Estimated street value was thirty million."

"Holy shit!"

"I know. This is no small time operation yet these guys are low level. Who's running the show?"

"Whoever it is, they killed John Tomlinson," said Karen.

"Time to figure out how the grieving widow fits in," said Ranger. "Karen and I will go in. You two in the observation room."

"This is an FBI investigation," said Vince.

"I'm the senior agent in charge. I say she goes in." They walked inside the interrogation room and Charlie was hunched over where his hands were handcuffed to the table. "Hello Charlie."

"Ranger, man, what the hell? I didn't have anything to do with this."

"The name is Special Agent Thomas Murdoch, FBI."

"And I'm Detective Sergeant Karen Anders, Santa Clarita PD."

"Santa Clarita?"

"I believe we've struck a nerve, Special Agent."

"I believe we have, Detective. Charlie, let me lay it out for you. We picked up your last shipment." Tom smiled and whistled. "Five hundred pounds of coke. That's major tonnage. You're looking at...well you can forget about seeing sunshine again. Ever."

"I didn't do anything, I swear. I wasn't apart of it."

"What about John Tomlinson?" asked Karen.

"Who?"

"Cut the bullshit. We know he was your uncle. His wife, Lois, has two sisters. Carol is your mother. Marie was Justin's mother."

"Was?"

"He's dead," said Tom. "That's what happens when you play with guns."

Charlie started to weep. "I swear I didn't want anything to do with it but the money was so good. More than I could ever make in town. All I had to do was cook and keep an eye on things. Uncle John would come up and give Justin and me orders. That way they couldn't bug us. Uncle John said this was going to be the last run. He wanted out of the business. He was taking his cut and getting out of town."

"Tomlinson wasn't the manufacturer. Who was running it?"

"I don't know, I swear. I didn't want to know."

“Why did you kill your Uncle John?” asked Karen.

“No, that wasn’t us. We didn’t want it.”

“Who did?”

Charlie looked at them and he almost felt sorry for him. “Aunt Lois. She called Justin one night. She said Uncle John was putting us all at risk by trying to get out of the business. We were to make it so no one could ever find him. I couldn’t do it. Uncle John was always so nice to me. I told Justin no, but he did it anyway. The last time he was here he told Uncle John to meet him out back. That’s where he stabbed him.”

“Why didn’t he shoot him?” asked Tom.

“He didn’t want you to hear. By then I’d tapped your phone. We knew you were a cop.” He looked at Tom and shrugged. “Sorry about that.”

“How did he get rid of the body?” asked Karen.

“He said he took it out in the desert and fixed it so no one could find him. How did you know he was dead?”

“We found him. Justin cut him up into pieces,” she answered.

Charlie paled and started to heave. Tom uncuffed one wrist while Karen shoved the metal wastebasket next to him. What little he had in his stomach reappeared. Tom nodded and they left Charlie alone in the room.

“There’s no way a kid that squeamish could be a part of the murder,” said Tom.

“Agreed,” said Karen.

Vince and Bill joined them from the observation room. “I’ll call the LA office and have them pick up Lois Tomlinson.”

“Hey, she’s ours,” said Bill.

“She’ll do a lot more time in federal prison for drug trafficking than she would for hiring a hit man,” said Karen.



“You’re not going to fight me on that?” asked Tom.

“No. Our assignment was to find out who killed John Tomlinson. We did that. Now you need to make your case against Lois for drug trafficking.”

“Yeah, we do. Vince, Detective Davis has some mad tech skills. We should take advantage of his experience with this case. He could help us tie the Tomlinsons to the suppliers. Detective Anders, do you think your Chief will object to loaning him out?”

“So long as the Santa Clarita PD receives the appropriate recognition for their assistance in making your case, I don’t think it will be an issue. Detective Davis, what do you say?”

Bill struggled to hold in a smile. “Yeah sure.”

“First things first,” said Vince. “Tell me about that tracker. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Oh, that’s my own design.”

Tom and Karen watched the two walked down the hall. “You know Vince will try and steal him for the bureau.”

“Yeah, well, he does have mad tech skills. He’s not always challenged at the local level. I’ll hate to lose him, but he’d be an asset to the FBI.”

“Are you always so agreeable, Detective?”

“Not always,” she smiled. “What are we going to do with Barf Boy?”

“I’ll have Vince transfer him to a safe house until we wrap up the widow.”

“What are you going to charge him with?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I’m going to offer him witness protection. He testifies against Aunt Lois and he gets a new life. He’s just a stupid kid.”

Karen looked up and down the hall then gave him a quick kiss. “You’re alright, Special Agent Murdoch.”

“You’re not so bad yourself, Detective Sergeant Anders.”

She stood back and sighed. “I guess you’ll be going back to your home office.”

“Yeah. I’ve got a desk full of paperwork with this case.”

“Not to mention a commendation in your future. A thirty million dollar seizure? That’s a pretty impressive haul.”

“Yeah, makes three weeks in The Pit worth while,” he smiled.

“Oh really? If you weren’t already injured I’d punch you for that.”

He slipped his good arm around her waist. To hell with whoever sees. “Karen, how about you come visit me and we figure out what all this is between us.”

“Tom, I want to, really, but we’re both busy and long distance is...well, it’s a pain in the ass.”

“True, but my place would make it worth the drive. I’ve got a condo with an ocean view.”

“The ocean? Where’s your home office?”

“Long Beach,” he grinned.

“Long Beach? That’s only...”

“About ninety minutes from Santa Clarita,” he gave her a kiss. “I googled it.”

Karen grinned. “Well aren’t you clever?”

“Not to mention hot, and ripped. Don’t forget ripped,” he laughed.

“Smart ass. Let’s go take care of Barf Boy and then figure out where we’re sleeping tonight.”

“Tonight?” He grinned and indicated his sling. “I’m wounded.”

She gave him a sly smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle.” She leaned in and whispered, “For now.” Karen turned and walked down the hall giving him a perfect view of six feet of passionate determination attached to the greatest pair of legs he’d ever seen.

Tom chuckled. “This is gonna be good.”