

Kit Frazier

SCOOP



Chapter One

I ducked under the crime scene tape the way I always do, like I know exactly what I'm doing, but this time I was a little more careful on account of the black-clad SWAT guys drawing down around the perimeter. Sometimes I think the only things standing between me and certain doom are instinct, pure dumb luck and a kick ass hairdresser.

"Little early aren't you, Cauley?" Jim Cantu was lounging against his cruiser looking like a Hispanic Marlboro Man as he surveyed the rugged limestone hills and gnarled oaks at the back of the Barnes' ranch. "What we got here is your basic suicide threat," he continued, squinting into the hot, Central Texas sun. "Don't obituaries get written *after* somebody's turned up a corpse?"

"This isn't for the *Sentinel*," I said, swatting dirt from the seat of my jeans. "Scooter called me this morning and said he wanted to talk."

"Doesn't matter. No media behind the line," he said, nodding toward the SWAT guys.

"You're lucky you didn't get shot."

"Calling me media is pure charity on your part," I said. "And I almost never get shot."

Cantu grinned down at me as I settled in beside him. Every now and then, Cantu cuts me a break, because once upon a time, he'd been a rookie beat cop when my dad was a detective and he sometimes steps in where my dad left off.

Cantu and I stood, staring at the tumble of weathered planks of the shed where Scott Barnes had holed up, presumably sucking on the business end of a shotgun.

This wasn't the earth-shattering incident it might seem elsewhere in the world. Here, you don't ask if you have any crazy people in the family. You ask which side they're on.

In Texas, we believe our own myths, and the wet heat of summer presses heavily on already fanciful minds.

Crossing his arms, Cantu looked at the bruise that was blooming on my forehead. “All right, blondie, I give. What happened to your head?”

“Banged it on a big piece of wood,” I said. Despite a raging hangover, I’d climbed a crosstie fence to get past the police line. I was hot and sweaty, and I had enough dirt under my nails to re-pot a geranium. Plus, now I had a bump on my head and a hole in my jeans, which showed a big patch of Wal-Mart underwear. These things almost never happen when you’re wearing nice undies.

“Hurricane Cauley.” Cantu shook his head. “You want off obits? Go chase a real story. I hear El Patron’s on the move.”

I had to stop myself from growling. Cantu knew I’d sell my Aunt Kat’s china for a story that would get me off the obituary page, and while I’d been assigned to do some of the research on El Patron—the latest South American syndicate to set up shop in Central Texas—the News Boys on the City Desk got the byline on the story. For the most part, I spend my days re-writing death notices, and if I’m lucky, I occasionally get to do legwork for the real reporters.

But getting something on El Patron could fix that for me. Organized crime was nothing new in Texas, but El Patron crossed the city limits into Looney-ville when they shoved a heavy duty Firestone around some poor bastard’s shoulders and burned him alive. Talk about a front-page scoop.

“Yeah, well, El Patron will have to wait,” I said, and winced as one of the SWAT guys with an orange-stocked sniper rifle disappeared into a thicket of sage. “Did you have to call the Jump Out Boys?” I said, staring at the rest of the SWAT team, which was

scattered among bushes and perched in the gnarled forks of live oaks.

“Had to,” Cantu said. “I got dinner duty tonight.”

“You called SWAT because it’s your turn to cook?” I said, thinking of Cantu’s three kids who could make a sane person call SWAT on a good day. “You know Scooter never hurt anybody.”

“And he won’t hurt anybody. Captain’s called a negotiator.”

“We don’t need a negotiator. Let me talk to him.”

“You talked to him last time.”

“Hey,” I said. “That thing with the goats was not my fault.”

Cantu snorted. “You busted in the back of that pet store and scared *los cabritos* so bad they passed out cold.”

“They were those weird fainting goats,” I said, staring at the shed. I shook my head.

“Exotic animals. I don’t know why Scooter can’t sell dogs and cats like a normal person.”

“He’s not a normal person. He’s a serial suicide. This is the second time he’s threatened to bite a bullet this month. It’s standard procedure to call SWAT and I shoulda never let you talk me out of it the first time.”

I started to say that serial suicide was an oxymoron and that Scooter had issues, what with his wife leaving him and all, when I sucked in a breath and stopped dead in my tracks. “Who is that?”

Near the fence line, a lone man loomed, speaking into a cell phone as he surveyed the scene. I’d practically grown up in the West Side substation, and I knew all the precinct cops and most of the usual suspects.

This guy was no usual suspect.

Tall and bronzed with a wide-legged stance, he was a dead ringer for Captain America. I had to remind myself to close my mouth. Probably my hormones. I haven't had a steady relationship since I installed my shower massage.

"Tom Logan." Cantu scowled. "FBI."

"You don't like him?"

"Nothing personal. We just don't need a bunch of Feds fucking up a local case."

"They're here on a suicide threat? Why would the Feds care if Scooter Barnes is having a bad day?" I said, but the rumble of an engine rolled over my voice.

"*Miranda,*" I swore.

Miranda Phillips stepped out of a white van, shook out her platinum hair, smoothed her slim skirt and tapped her Ferragamo-heeled foot while her television crew set up outside the flapping yellow crime scene tape. She might have been annoyed. It was hard to tell because her face never moved. It was frozen in a permanent look of surprise on account of all those Botox injections.

Miranda has her own wildly successful syndicated column at *The Austin Journal*, the Sentinel's flashier, better-funded rival newspaper and she's broadening her already triumphant resume by breaking into television.

Miranda never did time on the obituary page.

Miranda is Barbie, if Barbie gave up her Malibu Beach house to pursue a career in journalism. She's tall and blond and has all the accessories, including a closet full of fuck-me pumps. I, on the other hand, look like Skipper, Barbie's little sister. Permanently disheveled and always trying to keep up.

As long as I've known Miranda, I've never seen her sweat. She uses pretentious words like "exquisite" and "extraordinary" at inappropriate times.

I know this because a couple of Christmases ago I walked in on her riding my former husband like a wild, wet pony. *Exquisite*, she'd panted. *Extraordinary*.

"How'd she find us so fast?"

"Probably she has that OnStar-navigation-thing," Cantu said. He looked down at the hole in my jeans. "You should get that."

"I don't need any help," I said. The old shed was hard to find if you didn't know where to look. It was perched on a wooded knoll behind Scooter's dad's house on a bend in the Pedernales River near Paradise Falls. My friends and I used to spend sultry summer afternoons skinny-dipping in the cold spring waters, a memory not even two years in Northern California could extinguish.

"You were sneaking into a crime scene," Cantu pointed out. "You're not supposed to be here at all."

"Yeah, well, if it makes you feel any better these were my favorite jeans."

Miranda had finished tossing her hair and did a double take when she caught sight of me and Cantu.

"Well, hello, *Carrie*," Miranda purred as she prowled toward us, but she looked right past me like one of those smart bombs in search of a target.

"Cauley," I said, like she didn't already know.

"Right," she said without looking at me. "Like the dog."

I narrowed my eyes.

"What do we have here?" she said, and I was about to think of something really clever to say, but it didn't matter because she was staring at Captain America, who was still stalking the fence line talking on his cell phone.

I glanced over the horizon expectantly. The News Boys would be on the scene soon.

Luckily, I had anticipated this. You can only screw me four or five times before I start to notice a pattern. From somewhere down the tree-lined road, a red Toyota four-by-four rolled up and slid to a stop next to Miranda's van.

A rangy, pimply-faced kid climbed out of the truck and yelled, "Somebody order a pizza?" His voice only cracked a little, and it was hardly noticeable, what with all sniper rifles ratcheting his direction.

"Thirty minutes or less." I grinned at Cantu. "Just like the ad says."

The kid was reaching across the passenger seat to pull out a big white pizza box when a deep voice yelled, "Freeze!"

I watched as six SWAT guys had the pizza kid spread-eagled on the ground and Miranda was mobilizing her troop of television techs.

"You could go to hell for this," Cantu called after me.

"They're trained professionals," I called back. "They almost never shoot anybody."