

# Chapter 39



“Are you *still* sulking?”

Jaz pinched her lips together until they were white around the edges.

She and Sedona walked a few yards behind Bev and Michael. Sedona had planned it that way.

“Sulking leads to premature wrinkles, you know that, right?”

Apparently, Jaz wasn't in a humorous mood today. Or any other time during the past couple days.

They had come across another Walmart. No food, but they had scavenged fresh blankets and clothes, shoes, socks, bandannas and baseball caps. Seems not many people were interested in those items, luckily for them.

Sedona heard Michael ask ahead of them, “Hey, Mom. D'ya think it'll start?” She couldn't hear Bev's response but she looked around.

On the left side of the road stood a square stucco building about ten feet by ten feet. There was only one metal door and no windows. The object of Michael's query was a shiny red newer model Jeep Cherokee parked to the side of the building.

Sedona could have answered Michael's question herself: the electronics in it were probably shot.

*Be nice to go the rest of the way to DC in it, though,* she thought.

“Can't you try?” Michael asked hopefully.

“Honey, Mom can't hot wire cars.” From the sound of her voice she wished she could.

“I wonder what that building's for?” Michael said.

She didn't hear Bev's response this time but she looked at the building again. Plain. Ordinary. It wasn't a dwelling like the one they'd found in the woods. No one could possibly live in that without some type of ventilation or air conditioning. She didn't see any air conditioning

## Pen

units around it. She did spot an aluminum ladder on one side leading up to the roof. More than likely it was some type of electrical relay station.

“Not relating much these days,” she muttered.

She considered how she could best continue the conversation with Jaz. She was obstinate as hell that was for sure. Bev had told her Jaz was just like her father in many ways. Sedona had observed and learned for herself the child was more like her mother than Bev realized.

“Your Mom’s one of the bravest women I’ve ever known,” she tried again.

The sigh Jaz issued was one of tired exasperation. “So whaddya want me to do, Sedona? Get all weepy, realize how unfair I’ve been to my mother, confess how much I love her? What?”

“Well, you don’t have to get weepy about it,” she quipped.

Jaz sighed and rolled her eyes. “Please.”

“Girl, that is some ’tude you got goin’ on there. Why are you so angry with her?”

“She lied.”

“About your dad?”

After a moment she said, “And other things.”

“What other things?”

“Oh, I dunno. How about being in the military? Being in foster care? PTSD?”

“What about PTSD?”

Jaz went silent.

“C’mon, Jaz. You brought it up. Oh, wait a minute. This isn’t about all that stuff. Well, maybe it is,” she quickly amended when Jaz threw her a dour look. “The problem is really that you blame your mother for your dad’s decisions.”

“She pushed him away,” she said defensively.

“So, basically, you’re mad at your daddy but you’re takin’ it out on your mama.”

“What’s it to you?” Jaz snapped, stopping to eye Sedona with contempt.

Sedona stopped and looked down at the child. There was hurt, disappointment, contempt in those eyes. Those eyes were looking at the wrong person.

She bent down to be eye-to-eye with Jaz. She felt the heat of her own anger flash in the chocolate brown of her eyes. She said, steadily but with an intensity that wafted over the child. “You’re hurting your mother. She doesn’t deserve that. And that *pisses me off!*” She emphasized the last three words with every ounce of her own anger.

Jaz took a step back. Fear flashed across her face, her heart fluttered within her chest. They hadn't seen Sedona angry. Not yet. From the look of it that was probably a good thing.

Sedona stood. "Let me let you in on a little fact of life, missy. You listen good 'cuz I'm not gonna sugar-coat this for ya and I'm not gonna say it twice."

Jaz didn't take her eyes off the woman. Her mouth worked as though she was biting the inside of her cheek and her eyes misted. But Sedona had little sympathy for the girl at the moment. She glanced at her mother and Michael still walking ahead of them, unaware of the unfolding drama.

"Don't worry. We'll catch up." Sedona waited until Jaz looked at her again. When she spoke she enunciated each word slowly and carefully. "Little girl, all ... men ... are ... pigs. And from the sound of it, yo daddy is the biggest oinker of 'em all."

"He is not! He loved us!"

"Oh, really? Then why haven't you heard from him since he left?" When Jaz didn't answer, she continued. "Yo daddy left yo mama when she needed him the *most*."

"She was sick –"

"Uh uh. That's part of the package, honey. In sickness and in health. And yo daddy couldn't handle the sickness part so he bailed out. D'ya think he would have stayed around if you or Michael had gotten sick?"

Jaz didn't answer, mainly because she didn't think she knew the answer. And, yet, she knew the truth.

She looked away from Sedona, lowering her eyes to look at the ground: she couldn't face that truth reflected in the woman's eyes.

"Your mother wanted you, Jaz." Her voice cracked on the girl's name. She inhaled deeply and cleared her throat. "Imagine growing up knowing your own mother, the woman who carried you in her womb for nine months, didn't want you."

Jaz slowly looked up into Sedona's eyes again. The intensity of the pain and disappointment she saw were almost more than she could bear.

"Your mother cared enough about you to get the help she needed, to take her meds every day so she could take care of you. She did that so she would feel *worthy* of you. I think she deserves better from you. Whadda *you* think?"

They stared at each other.

"You tryin' to make me feel guilty?" It was a weak argument spoken in a weak voice.

## Pen

Even though she saw through the kid's façade – a small attempt to appear big – she thought, *God, this kid's as stubborn as her mother.* Aloud she quietly said, “No, Jaz. I'm just trying to help you see things as they really are.”

She turned and began walking away. “If you need to talk, you know where to find me,” she said over her shoulder.

Jaz watched her walk away. After a few moments, she followed.

“They're not following, Mom,” Michael said looking back over his shoulder.

Bev glanced back but didn't stop. “Looks like they're talking about something. Don't worry. They'll catch up.” The slightest tinge of jealousy was in her voice. Then she realized: it wasn't in Jaz's nature to confide in anyone. Whatever they were discussing, Sedona had probably initiated the conversation.

They walked in silence for a few moments.

“Mom?” Michael said tentatively.

“Yeah, sweetie?”

“Um, uh, wh-why do you have PTSD?”

She groaned inwardly and closed her eyes for a moment. “You know what that is?”

“Yeah, i-it's um, a mental health condition triggered by a traumatic event whether experienced or witnessed.”

A small amused laugh in her voice she said, “That is the clinical definition of it.”

“Is it wrong?”

“Well, no, it isn't wrong. It's just that, well, it's just that that definition doesn't really portray it like it really is.”

“You mean like the mood swings? Depression? Nightmares?”

“Okay, you can stop now,” she said quickly. There was a slight edge of irritation to her voice. She felt shame that her nine year old son knew the symptoms from personal experience.

“I don't mean to upset you, Mom. Really, I don't.”

She stopped, silently chided herself. She looked down at Michael. His upturned face glowed with the adoration he felt for her. It broke her heart. She felt she wasn't worthy of such adoration, especially from her children.

“I know, Michael. And I don't mean to get upset. It's just that it's.” She stopped. She looked around as though words would fall from the sky.

“You've never been very comfortable talking about it?” Michael suggested.

She looked down at him in awe. “No. I never have. It took me years to open up to my therapist about it.”

Knowing she wouldn't tell him, he posed his next question more in a rhetorical sense. “What happened to you over there, Mom? I mean, I know it had to be something really horrible because you can't seem to let it go.”

For just a moment, Michael feared he had overstepped some invisible boundary into the realm of *stuff-that-sets-Mom-off*.

But Bev's silence wasn't from the onset of a tantrum: the Lexipro was doing its job. Even as Michael had voiced the question, flashes of memories flooded her mind. The heat, the fire, the sound of bullets, the sand, the fear and the sweat.

She was jerked back to reality when she felt Michael slip his small hand into hers. She looked down at him. So much concern on his face. Beneath that look of concern lay the simple adoration of a son for his mother.

Her heart broke a second time. The ache of it pierced her chest until she felt like weeping. She loved her children so much and wanted so badly to do her best for them. So many times she felt she failed in that endeavor, falling far short of what they deserved.

Beneath that was the realization that the look of adoration would be replaced with one of contempt, possibly outright hatred – to which they would be entitled – should her children ever know the truth. That realization frightened her; cut her to the very core of her being, sliced into the very marrow of her bones. She would be deserving of their contempt, their hatred. They did not deserve the pain of those emotions.

Her throat constricted with the emotions she felt and she couldn't speak. She could only smile down at him and give his hand a squeeze.

“It's okay, Mom,” he said quietly. And he hugged her about the waist.

It was almost her undoing.

The mother in her returned the hug, kissing the top of his baseball cap.

The soldier in her got her emotions under control. She had to be strong for all of them. They had to keep moving.

She gently pulled him away and looked at him. “Someday, Michael, when you're older and, hopefully, I'm more,” she searched for the right word, “stable, maybe I can tell you and Jaz all about it. And, maybe,” she hesitated again; the next words were painful to say, “maybe you and Jaz will be able to forgive me.”

## Pen

He looked up at her, curious about what there was to forgive but hesitant to question any further. He said the only thing he could say; the best thing he could have said: “I love you, Mom.”

She smiled through her tears. “I love you, too, Michael.” She removed his baseball cap and kissed him on his forehead. She put the cap back on his head askew. She took a deep breath and said, “I wonder what’s keeping the other two?” She looked down the road behind them. They had walked around a curve in the road and Jaz and Sedona were out of sight.

“Should we go back for them?”

“Maybe another minute or two –” She stopped. She’d been aware of a noise in the woods for the last few seconds. Assuming it was nothing more than wind rustling leaves, she hadn’t been concerned about it. Until she realized there was no wind at all. She now recognized the sound for what it was: the rustling and crunching of underbrush indicating the sound of movement.

“Is there someone in the woods, Mom?”

Keeping herself between the woods and Michael, she turned to face the woods. The noise didn’t sound close but it was definitely headed toward them.

The woods before them sloped upward. The foliage was thick and green making it difficult to see anyone coming.

Instinctively, she reached behind her back and put her hand on the Sig.

Grunts accompanied the rustling, crunching sounds. Odd grunts. Low and guttural. They sounded funny. Not quite –

A loud growl issued from the woods. Definitely not human. It sounded like –

“Shit!” Bev said hoarsely. She turned and physically turned Michael in the direction from which they’d come. “Run!”

Sedona had walked a few yards with Jaz lagging behind when Michael’s voice – literally a nonstop scream – reached her from around the curve. Alarmed she stopped, uncertain about whether to run to or away from the sound of his voice.

He dashed around the curve then followed closely by Bev screaming, “Run!”

Immediately adrenaline pumped into her body, increasing her heart rate, sending fight or flight impulses along her nerve endings. There was just one thing she needed to know. “Where?”

“Back to the building! Run! Now!”

Sedona hesitated only a moment longer; long enough to see what they were running from.

A rather large, rather angry-looking black bear.

Her eyes opened wide, those nerve endings now screaming for her to run.

She turned and charged past Jaz who stood, her face pale, staring wide-eyed at the sight of her mother and brother being chased by a bear.

“Run, Jaz!” she screamed. When Jaz didn't respond, she stopped, quickly turned the child and physically pushed her into running ahead of her. “Run!”

Bev and Michael soon caught up to – and passed – Sedona and Jaz.

*Great, Sedona thought wildly, now that bear's right behind me.*

The bear loped behind them at a distance of a couple dozen yards, not attempting, yet, to close the distance between them. Human feet running out of fear and desperation kept him at a good distance.

Bev reached the building first. She ran up to the metal door and grabbed the knob. “Dammit!” she cried. “Locked!”

“The ladder!” Sedona shouted as she charged past Bev.

“What ladder?” she asked even as she followed.

“Over here!” She ran to the opposite side of the building where an aluminum ladder led up to the roof. She stopped, grabbed Jaz and pushed the girl toward the ladder. “Up!” she said.

Jaz didn't have to be told again. She began climbing the rungs at breakneck speed.

“Michael! Go!” Bev yelled as the child began clambering up after his sister.

The bear growled.

“Go!” she said to Sedona. But Sedona hesitated. “What?”

“Vertigo,” she said helplessly.

Bev grabbed her arm and shoved her toward the ladder. “Damn your vertigo, Arizona! Get up that ladder!”

Sedona took one or two steps up the rungs and made the mistake of looking down. She stopped as dizziness overtook her.

Bev charged up the ladder after Sedona almost knocking both of them off running into the woman when she stopped.

“I can't,” Sedona wailed.

“Yes. Yes, you can,” Bev said breathlessly. “Please Sedona,” she pleaded desperately. The growl of the bear was closer to the building. “Look up, don't look down! Think of it as stairs. Whatever it takes, do what you have to do and *get up this ladder!*”

## Pen

The word became a mantra in Sedona's head as she tilted her head upward and began to climb. *Stairs. Stairs. Just stairs. Funky stairs, stairs you have to climb with hands and feet, that's all, just stairs. It's either this or get eaten by a bear. Hey that could be a poem. Stairs or eaten by a bear. Stairs, that's all, just stairs.*

Upon reaching the top of the roof, she literally threw herself over to make way for Bev, not looking, not paying attention, not even caring where or how she landed so long as she got off those funky stairs. She landed on her back, her head falling on something soft, not caring what it was. She lay there panting, feeling she was completely useless, but unable to stop the dizziness and nausea overtaking her.

Bev vaulted onto the roof then turned and began pulling up the ladder.

"Can bears climb ladders?" Michael asked his voice panicked.

"We don't wanna find out!" Bev shot back. "Jaz! Help me!"

Jaz, who'd stood in shock until that moment, quickly dispensed with her backpack and grabbed the ladder. Michael attempted to help, but with his mother and sister pulling for all they were worth there was no place at which he could grip the ladder and help. He stood by helplessly as they pulled the ladder up and laid it across the roof.

The bear growled from the ground below.

Michael joined them at the edge and looked down at the bear.

He growled, stood upon his hind legs and stretched himself up the side of the building. The stucco-covered concrete allowed him no purchase and he sat back on his haunches, growling with more exuberance. Obviously, he was a little perturbed that breakfast was out of reach. He took the liberty of lying down to wait them out.

"How long will he stay down there, Mom?" Michael asked.

Gasping for breath, Bev said, "I have no idea, honey."

"So we're up here for the duration?" Jaz's voice carried a note of fascination in it. At least it wasn't accusatory.

"Looks that way," Bev said. "He'll get tired of waiting. Leave. Sooner or later. I hope." Her voice didn't have much hope in it. She took a deep breath, having finally caught it, and exhaled, her cheeks puffing. She turned and surveyed the roof spotting Sedona a few feet away. The woman still lay on her back, eyes closed, gasping for breath. Cautiously, she said, "Uh, you okay there, Arizona?"

"In a minute," she gasped. The nausea was gone but the dizziness still made her head swim.

"Uh, well, you, uh, might wanna move."

She cautiously opened one eye and looked at Bev. "Why?"

Jaz turned and issued a short, "Gross!"

"What?" Sedona asked.

"Ewyuck," Michael said when he spotted Sedona.

She was becoming alarmed. "What?" she asked tartly, daring to open both eyes.

"Uh, well, um, that's not a pillow under your head," Bev said.

Sedona didn't move. A sickening dread filled her, the nausea returning. Where was the owner of that Jeep Cherokee?

She groaned as she rolled away. Overwhelmed by dizziness and nausea she looked at where she had been lying.

Though the image rolled in her vision she recognized a bloated decomposing body a few feet away. Nausea hit her again. She fought to keep down the stale granola bar she'd had for breakfast that morning. It was a losing battle; the nausea wouldn't be denied its escape.

"You okay, Sedona?" Bev's voice was close as she knelt beside her.

When she placed her hand in the middle of Sedona's back, she lost the battle. Her stomach clenched. Half-digested granola bar and bile ended up on the roof beneath her. She found the wherewithal to nod as her stomach clenched again and she dry heaved.

Bev continued rubbing her back which had both a soothing and an irritating affect but she didn't stop her. If nothing else it provided her comfort knowing the woman didn't abandon her in disgust.

After ceaselessly muttering, *the stairs, the stairs, the funky funky stairs* in her head, the clenching stopped. She fell over onto her side and rolled over onto her back. She was still light-headed and remained in her prone position. From experience she knew the dizziness would pass; it only required lying very still until it did.

"I'm okay," she rasped, her throat raw from the expulsion of what little her stomach had held.

"Can you sit up?"

"Not yet. A few minutes. Sorry."

"No need to be sorry. You did good, Arizona."

She knew what Bev meant: she'd made sure the kids got up the ladder first. Instinct. It was just instinct. But she knew what that meant to Bev.

The world slowly came back into focus. She cautiously turned her head and looked up at Bev. The image didn't roll. Good. A good start. The body behind Bev was partially blocked by Michael and Jaz, both looking at her with concern. That was good too. The rest of the body, which consisted mostly of jean-clad legs, she could mentally block out.

"Think you could drink some water?" Bev asked.

## Pen

“In a minute,” her voice still raspy. “Just gotta get my bearings.”

“Take your time,” Bev said gently. The bear growled from the ground. She gave her a wan smile. “I have a feeling we’re not going anywhere anytime soon.” She gently patted her arm and stood.

As Bev walked to the edge of the rooftop and gazed down at the bear, Sedona slowly, carefully, pulled herself to an upright sitting position. She intentionally put her back to the dead body.

Michael and Jaz walked around to her line of vision.

“You okay, Arizona?” Michael asked. The poor kid’s face was grimaced with worry.

She gave him a wan smile. “I’ll be okay.”

“You look a little, um,” Jaz searched for the right word, “gray. I would say you look a little green around the gills, but it’s hard to tell.” She took off her backpack and unzipped it.

Sedona chuckled then stopped as this unsettled her queasy stomach. “Was that a joke?”

“More like an attempt at one.” She removed a bottle of water and held it out for Sedona. “This is rainwater. A little cleaner than the stream water.”

She accepted the bottle and gave the girl a sincere smile. “Thanks, Jaz.”

“You’re welcome.” She looked as though she wanted to say more but she didn’t.

And Sedona didn’t press. She knew there would come a time when the girl might want to continue their discussion in more detail but certainly not within earshot of her mother. She opened the bottle and took a tentative sip of water. She waited to make sure it stayed down before taking another.

“Well,” Bev said rejoining them. “That is one determined bear.”

“One *hungry* bear,” Sedona amended. “What do we do now? Just wait it out?”

Bev shrugged. “What choice do we have?”

“Good point,” she agreed morosely and took another sip of water.

Bev removed her backpack and walked toward the other end of the roof away from the body. “I know what I’m gonna do.”

“What?” Michael asked following her.

“I am going to try out the blanket I salvaged from Wally world yesterday and take a nap.”

Sedona watched as Bev opened her backpack and removed the blanket which she spread out on the rooftop. She tossed her backpack at the top of blanket. “Are you serious?” she asked with some dismay.

## **Nero's Fiddle**

“How can you possibly sleep with,” she glanced behind her only long enough to confirm the body was still where it laid, “a dead body only a few feet away?”

“Easy,” she grunted as she lay upon the blanket. She laid her head atop the backpack removing the baseball cap on her head in the process. Just before placing the cap over her face to block out the sun, she looked playfully at Sedona. “The dead body won’t try to *eat* me.”