



Ann Charles

THE WILD TURKEY TANGO

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Jackrabbit Junction, Arizona

Thanksgiving Day

“What are you doing with that gun?” Claire Morgan shot a worried glance across the front seat of her Jeep Wrangler at her younger sister, Kate, who was packing heat. “Filling someone’s hide full of lead is not on our list of things to do in Yuccaville before tonight’s Thanksgiving shindig.”

Kate rested the derringer in the palm of her hand. The double barrels were shorter than her middle finger. “It’s for protection.”

“That’s not even real is it?” Claire’s older sister asked. Ronnie leaned forward from the backseat, peeking around the headrest. “It looks like a toy.”

“It’s not a freaking toy.” Claire reached across the front seat to push Kate’s hands and the tiny pistol away. “Put that damned thing back in your purse before you shoot one of us.”

Getting shot was not on her agenda for today. She’d had enough gunplay to last her a lifetime after the last few months in the southeastern Arizona desert.

“It’s not even loaded.” Kate set the gun on the dashboard. “So relax.”

“I’ll relax when this Thanksgiving fiasco is over.” Claire slowed the Jeep as they reached the Yuccaville city limits. “In the meantime, don’t make things worse.”

“Oh ye of little faith in me,” Kate said, pulling a box of .22 caliber bullets from her purse and plopping them down on the dash next to the derringer. “Dost thou think I’m totally without brain cells when it comes to a handgun?”

“It’s not your intelligence I question,” Claire said.

“It’s your sanity,” Ronnie finished from the backseat. “Where did you get that little gun anyway?”

Claire knew exactly where Kate had found the derringer. “She stole it from Ruby’s safe down in the basement office.”

The safe actually didn’t belong to their step-grandmother, but rather to her dead husband, Joe Martino—aka Jackrabbit Junction’s notorious thief of thieves. The collection of expensive trinkets he’d skimmed over many years of smuggling for nasty sons-a-bitches was stashed all over the house and the Dancing Winnebago R.V. Park. Unfortunately for Claire, she kept stumbling upon Joe’s secret hiding places and finding stolen goods, putting not only her life at risk but her family’s lives as well.

“I didn’t steal it.” Kate pulled a tube of lip balm out of her purse and slathered her lips. “I’m just borrowing it until things calm down and Ronnie can quit walking around squinty-eyed and always watching over her shoulder.”

“I’m not squinty-eyed,” Ronnie said, squinting out her side window.

Claire followed Ronnie’s gaze. A black, late model SUV with dark tinted windows was pulling out of the gas station they were passing. When it turned in the opposite direction,

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Ronnie settled back into her seat.

Her older sister had good reason to be squinty-eyed. Her ex-husband had played in the sandbox with some big league criminals over the last few years. When the Feds busted him for laundering the big leaguers' money, out came the truth that he'd been embezzling from the felons as well. Now those pissed off goons were hiring hitmen to make Ronnie's ex pay. With her ex-hubby safely tucked away in prison, however, they'd set their sights on what they figured was the next best thing—Ronnie.

Between Joe's tainted legacy and Ronnie's ex, it was only a matter of time before another scorpion crawled out from under a rock and pointed its stinger in the direction of Jackrabbit Junction, aiming to kill.

Claire grimaced at Ronnie in the rearview mirror. "You have been squinting more lately. Maybe you should experiment with your eye makeup, see if there's a way you can make the wrinkles blend in more."

"Good idea." Kate jumped on the bandwagon. "You could line your eyes with dark kohl like Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*. I'll bet that would make Sheriff Harrison fumble with his handcuffs the next time you two sneak into The Shaft's storeroom to take ol' one eye to the optometrist."

"Ol' one eye to the ..." Claire aimed a furrowed brow in Kate's direction. "Where'd you hear that one?"

"Chester drove me to the grocery store last night for some mint chocolate chip ice cream. These pregnancy cravings are brutal."

That explained it. Chester was one of their grandfather's bristly old Army buddies whose vernacular barometer rarely rose above "crude with a chance of lewd." He often claimed to be too old to give a damn about what came out of his mouth anymore and was more concerned about the goings-on south of his belt buckle.

"So what if I squint now." Ronnie appeared to be running several conversation beats behind. "Walking around with a target on my back makes sleep a pipe dream most nights."

"Have you tried some sleeping pills?"

"I don't want to take drugs. They might dull my senses and make me even more of a sitting duck."

"You could always take up residence in the Sheriff's bed," Kate suggested.

"Leave Grady out of this." In the rearview mirror, Claire saw Ronnie frown down at her hands. "He has enough stress in his life without adding mine to his plate."

Sheesh, she sure was touchy about the Sheriff lately. That made Claire wonder if something else was going on that Ronnie wasn't sharing with them. The very something the Sheriff had warned Claire about a week ago when he had asked her to keep an eye on Ronnie. It would be typical of her older sister to sit on a potentially explosive secret in order to shield her family from more trouble.

"Maybe the Sheriff would enjoy easing some of your stress." Kate wiggled her eyebrows at Claire and then Ronnie. "If you know what I mean."

Claire snorted. "God, you really need to stop hanging around Chester."

Ronnie's brow creased into a deep V. "It's not Grady's job to solve my problems for me."

"Fine. Play a hard-ass." Kate held up the derringer, the barrels pointed at the roof. "You could always keep this under your pillow."

"Damn it, Kate." Claire rolled down her window and leaned partway out, putting space

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between her and her crazy gun-toting sister. “Would you put that dang thing back in your—”

“Look!” Kate pointed the gun at something out her closed window. “Did you see that?”

“Shit-criminy! Don’t point that gun out the window!” Claire cursed under her breath. Had she forgotten they were in Arizona? If someone down here saw a gun pointed out the window, they were likely to have a flashback of the O.K. Corral and shoot back.

“What was it?” Ronnie asked, her squint returning as she peered through the glass. “Did you see someone suspicious looking?”

Kate sighed. “No, Ms. Paranoid. I saw a turkey.”

A turkey? Claire did a double take at her sister. “This pregnancy is really scrambling your marbles.”

“I’m serious. It was a real, flesh and blood turkey. Make a right up there at the next street and circle back. We need to rescue it.”

“Kate, look here.” Claire grabbed the to-do list Ruby had given her before she’d left the R.V. park and held it toward the space cadet in the passenger seat. “Nowhere on this piece of paper does it say to rescue a live turkey, and there’s no time to go chasing tail feathers. We’re on a set schedule here thanks to Gramps’s stupid mutt.”

Earlier this morning, Henry, their grandfather’s spoiled beagle, had knocked over the pot in which their mother had been brining the turkey. To make matters worse, Henry then had dragged the bird carcass all over the campground with delusions of grandeur concerning his hunting skills. Their only hope of having turkey for Thanksgiving now relied on the grocery store in Yuccaville having a fresh one still available.

Kate put the derringer back on the dash and took the list from Claire, pointing at the first item. “It says right there at the top, *fresh turkey*.”

“Fresh as in not frozen, Sputnik. Not fresh as in still gobbling.” Claire slowed to a stop at the red light. She really hoped the store wasn’t out of turkey or they’d have to buy a bottle of Wild Turkey instead and get their mother good and soused so she didn’t blow a gasket that her first Thanksgiving in Arizona was a bust.

“I don’t care about this silly dinner and don’t call me Sputnik.” Kate socked Claire in the shoulder. “It’s Thanksgiving and I’m going to go rescue that turkey before someone eats it.” Before Claire realized what was happening, Kate had climbed out of the Jeep and slammed the door behind her.

“Kate!” Claire yelled at the closed window. “Get back here!”

The light turned green.

Kate waved at her from the sidewalk and headed back in the direction of the turkey.

“She’s totally bonkers,” Claire said.

A horn honked behind her.

“Bonkers or not, you need to go get her.”

“Thank you, back seat driver, but I don’t need your help.”

The horn honked longer.

“The gas pedal is a pretty basic concept,” Ronnie said. “You just push on it and the Jeep will move forward.”

“Son of a peach!” Hitting the right blinker, Claire turned down the street Kate had wanted her to take before she’d jumped ship.

Ronnie crawled up into the front seat as they circled the block. “Over there,” she pointed out the windshield. “She headed down the alley behind that smoke shop.”

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“I could understand chasing down a stray dog, but a turkey? Come on.” She frowned at the derringer still sitting on the dash. “Put that damned gun back in Kate’s purse before somebody ends up shot.”

As Ronnie stuffed the cartridges and gun into the purse, Claire slowed and hit her blinker.

“Not this one, the next.” Ronnie grabbed the wheel to keep Claire from turning. She pointed to a gap in the buildings a half a block in front of them.

“I liked it better when you were bossing me around from the back seat.” Claire knocked Ronnie’s hand off the steering wheel and made a left where her sister still pointed. She noticed the No Outlet sign right before catching sight of Kate’s red jacket at the other end of an alley littered with tumbleweeds and plastic bags.

When Claire rolled closer, Kate made a throat cutting motion at her to kill the engine.

Claire shut it down, scowling. “This is a bad idea.”

“It’s only a turkey.”

“Famous last words.” She climbed out of the Jeep. “Now what?” she asked Kate, who was slipping off her red jacket.

Kate eyed her Jeep. “Do you have any rope in your toolbox?”

“I have a hammer.”

“Don’t you dare hurt this poor thing!”

“Kate,” Claire tried to reason with her nutty sister, “it’s a turkey not a stray cat. You can’t take it home, litterbox train it, and snuggle with it on cold nights.”

“Have you ever tried training a turkey?” Ronnie joined them.

“Sure,” Claire said. “Back when I worked on that wild turkey ranch in Cuckoo-land, we’d catch turkeys all day long and teach them to roll over and play dead.”

Ronnie pursed her lips at Claire. “Someone spooned an extra dollop of sarcasm into her coffee this morning.”

“Why am I the only one who thinks this is a ridiculous side trip?”

“Because you’ve lost your Thanksgiving spirit.” Kate held her coat out, like she expected to wrap it around the bird and give it a hug.

Claire had plenty of Thanksgiving spirit, starting with the desire to get to the store and find a fresh, non-breathing turkey to roast until it was a beautiful, golden brown delight. Her jeans had loosened over the last week with all of the work she’d been doing cleaning up around the R.V. park. Today, she planned to tighten them back up with plenty of turkey, dressing, and pie. “What do you propose we do if we manage to catch the bird, Kate?”

“Take it out into the boonies and set it free to live the life of the nomad it was meant to be.”

“You’ve been watching too much of the Animal Planet channel.”

“Many of the world’s animals need our help to survive.”

Holy Greenpeace! Impending motherhood along with its heavy doses of hormones had melted Kate’s previously cool, somewhat self-absorbed heart into a big beating ball of sensitivity. It often bubbled with so much love these days that it leaked out her eyes in the form of tears.

“I think we should take it to Grady,” Ronnie said. “He’ll know what to do with it.”

“Good idea.” For once, Claire didn’t wince at the idea of including the law.

“It’s a horrible idea!” Kate glared at Ronnie and Claire. “He’ll turn it over to the local dog catcher who’ll throw it into a little cage—or worse, he’ll shoot it and eat it for dinner.”

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Besides, it's illegal to trap and catch wild turkeys out of season."

"Then what the hell are we doing here?" Claire asked.

"We're not trapping or catching it. We're *rescuing* it. Huge difference."

"Kate," Claire squeezed her younger sister's shoulder, trying to be understanding. "I know those baby hormones are taking you on your own version of Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, but try to be reasonable about this. It's just a turkey."

Kate batted away Claire's hand and held her jacket up in front of her, waving the red side toward the turkey. "I am being reasonable. It's dangerous for a turkey to be running around on Thanksgiving. It's our duty as the caretakers of this planet to help all animals without opposable thumbs."

"That's it." Claire threw up her hands. "I officially declare Kate mentally unstable. Ronnie, grab the straitjacket."

Ronnie grabbed Kate's red jacket instead, pulling it out of her hands. "It's not a bull, Katie. There's an easier way to catch a turkey."

There was? "How do you know how to catch a turkey?" Claire asked her older sister.

"This isn't my first turkey roundup." Ronnie flapped Kate's jacket at the bird and ran toward it, yodeling as she attacked.

Claire stood frozen in surprise, watching her usually refined older sister rush the turkey.

The bird let out a series of loud gobbles and shot straight toward the brick wall of the building on their left. It hit the brick head on, and then timbered over like a stately redwood, landing with its feet in the air. Turkey feathers floated around it.

"Ronnie!" Kate stumbled toward the bird, her hand partially covering her mouth. "You killed it!"

Ronnie walked up to the turkey, gently nudging it with her boot. "It's not dead. It knocked itself out cold."

Claire shook free of her surprised stupor and joined her sisters, peering down at the bird. "Where did you learn that trick? In Cow Tipping 101?"

With a shrug, Ronnie said, "I wasn't the goody two-shoes you've always accused me of being."

Claire grinned. "So in addition to being married to a money launderer, you also wrangled wild turkeys? What other skeletons do you have in that closet?"

After flipping Claire off, Ronnie bent over the turkey and draped Kate's jacket over it.

"Hey! That's my favorite jacket."

"You're the one who wanted to save the wild turkeys of the world." Ronnie wrapped the jacket clear around the bird and then tied the sleeves in a knot to secure the wings. "Let's load this bird up and get rid of it. We need to get back to that list Ruby gave us before all of the freshly dead turkeys at the store are taken. Claire, grab its feet."

"We're not putting the thing in my new Jeep."

"Stop being a fusspot."

"It will poop all over my toolbox and carpet."

"If it does, Katie will clean it up when we get home."

"I already donated my favorite jacket. Can't we tie it to the roof and drive slow until we get out of town?"

Ronnie shook her head at them, her upper lip curled in disgust. "You two are such weenies. Suck it up and let's get this turkey business done."

"Fine, I'll pick up the damned bird," Claire said. Grumbling under her breath, she

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opened the back of her Jeep and grabbed her brand spanking new expensive leather gloves. “This is insane, you know,” she told Kate a minute later as she carried the turkey to the back of her Jeep. “If you weren’t pregnant, I’d tie *you* up in your jacket and take you to a mental hospital.” She slammed the back of the Jeep closed and pulled off her gloves. “Okay, Mastermind,” she said to Ronnie. “Where to now?”

“I caught the danged bird. It’s your turn to be the brains of the operation.”

As far as Claire was concerned, catching it had been an example of not using their brains. Now they had a comatose bird in the back and risked getting charged with illegally hunting a turkey and who knew what other fine-incurring offenses if the Sheriff or any of his deputies pulled them over.

She glared at Tweedledee and Tweedledum in turn. “Both of you get in the Jeep before the bird wakes up.”

“Katie, you take the back,” Ronnie opened the door for her sister.

“Why do I have to ride in back?”

“To be closer to your rescued turkey. Besides, you’re pregnant.”

“Both of those reasons are total bullshit,” Kate said, but climbed into the back seat anyway.

Ronnie handed Kate her purse and slid onto the passenger seat. “So, where are we going?”

“To Dirty Gerties.” Starting the Jeep, Claire reversed out of the alley. “Then the grocery store.”

“Why are we taking the bird to a strip club?” Ronnie asked as she buckled her seatbelt. “You thinking about having it do the Chicken Dance on stage?”

“A turkey wrangler and a comedian. Your talent appears to be limitless.”

“I thought we needed to hurry over to the grocery store before the fresh turkeys are gone,” Kate said from the back.

“Dirty Gerties is on the way to the store and stopping there takes care of the second item on our list.” Claire hit the gas and headed toward the strip club.

“What’s the second item?” they both asked in unison.

“To pick up an even bigger, not-so-fresh turkey.”