



Ann Charles

THE WILD TURKEY TANGO

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Jackrabbit Junction, Arizona

Friday, December 28th

You know what sucks about being in jail?” Claire Morgan asked. She stopped pacing the floor inside Cell A at the Cholla County Sheriff’s Office to glare at her sister.

“The smell of urine coming from the corner,” Kate said. She’d been holding up the concrete block wall since they’d been hauled in by Deputy “Dipshit” Ernie almost an hour ago, refusing to sit on the cot that had been supposedly deloused of late.

“No.” Claire crossed her arms. “Being in jail sucks. Period. And it’s your fault I’m here, crazy.”

Studying her nails, Kate harrumphed. “I’d use an exclamation mark rather than a period after that first sentence to make it more effective.”

“I’m going to leave an exclamation mark in the middle of your forehead if you correct my English again, teacher.”

“I didn’t correct your English. I simply made an editorial suggestion.”

Kate looked up from her nail inspection. Her double-wide smile and shifty eyes made Claire cringe. The porch light was on in Kate’s head, but nobody was home at the moment. Her sister had been wearing that same manic expression outside of the grocery store earlier right before her nutty train derailed and careened into Claire.

“You need to chill out, Claire,” ol’ shifty-eyes whispered. She leaned closer. The whole left side of Kate’s face twitched. “Gramps will be here soon to spring us.”

No he wouldn’t, not unless their grandfather had recently developed the ability to read minds across vast distances. “Gramps will not be here soon,” Claire whispered back. “I wasn’t granted a free call this time, remember? And *you* used your one call to order a freaking pizza.”

Kate snort-cackled, returning to her nail inspection. “You shouldn’t have tackled a cop.” Her voice returned to a normal level. “Even if it was Deputy Dipshit.”

“For the millionth time, I didn’t tackle him. I was trying to shove him out of the way of your so-called runaway shopping cart and tripped on the front wheels.”

“Then how do you explain his bloody nose? Let me guess, your fist accidentally rammed into his face during your heroic attempt to save his life?”

“It was my elbow, not my fist. And yes, it was an accident. If I’d intended to do it on purpose, I’d have given him more than a bloody nose.”

Kate sniffed. “Didn’t look like an accident from where I stood.”

“Yeah, well your head is a big coconut full of funhouse mirrors these days, so your eyewitness report is suspect at best.” Claire resumed her pacing. “This is the thanks I get for trying to protect you and your kid. An hour penned in the pokey with you.”

“Don’t even try to make this about the baby.” Kate patted her little round belly, her face morphing into a loving matronly expression.

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Just over four months pregnant now, Claire's willowy blond sister had finally begun to show. Sadly though, Claire had looked more pregnant than Kate after Christmas dinner last week, a truth that their mother had made sure to point out in front of everyone during her spontaneous toast with her fourth glass of cognac.

"I don't have to try, Mad Hatter," Claire mumbled.

Getting pregggo had rocketed her younger sister's usually grounded brain clear into the thermosphere, where it orbited at the edge of outer space, radioing in for earthly updates once or twice a day.

"I heard that, brat. Next you'll start harping again about my lack of mental stability."

Claire contemplated banging her head on the cell bars until someone came to cart her away in a straitjacket. At least she'd have some peace and quiet locked away in a padded room. "Kate, you were attempting to commit a hit-and-run crime on a deputy of the law with a shopping cart in the grocery store parking lot."

"I told you that I lost control of the cart. Plain and simple. You and Deputy Ernie are making too much out of a minor mishap."

"How could you lose control on a flat stretch of asphalt?"

"The handle was slippery."

That wasn't going to fly in front of a judge. "What about the incident that happened before that?"

"What incident? I don't know what you're talking about. You mean putting groceries in the trunk of my car? Is that illegal now in Yuccaville? It's not like I was trunk-or-treating in a bikini, offering high-mileage lap dances in exchange for a carton of lactose-free milk."

"High-mileage?"

Her sister sighed. "Don't you remember last week when Chester was explaining the difference between high- and low-mileage dances to us during our game of euchre?"

Chester Thomas was their grandfather's old Army buddy who spent way too much time at Dirty Gerties, Yuccaville's only strip club, for a seventy-year-old man. Claire's and Kate's older sister, Ronnie, claimed Chester had the hots for the club's owner. She believed he hung out there trying to land more than a peep show or two, but Claire had her doubts due to the old boy's fondness for bikini mud wrestling.

Claire squeezed her eyes shut, trying to remove all the images from her head that came with Chester and mud and bikinis. "I'm referring to the threat you made."

Kate scoffed. "That wasn't a threat. It was more of a recommendation."

"Wow, that's a serious case of liar-liar-pants-on-fire there. You threatened to punch Ernie in the mouth for calling you fat."

"That's not true. I merely suggested that someone needed to feed the deputy a knuckle sandwich and I happened to have five meaty fingers on hand."

Boy oh boy, there was no rationalizing with insanity. "Okay, so you were just making a suggestion, I get it. But you do realize that you can't go around ramming people with shopping carts, especially sheriff's deputies, right? If you'd hit Ernie with that cart, he probably would've slapped you with something absurd like an attempted vehicular manslaughter charge."

Kate waved her off. "Once Sheriff Harrison gets here, we'll clear up this little misunderstanding and be on our way home again."

Easy for Kate to say, she wasn't the one facing an attempted battery charge from a Cholla County sheriff's deputy. "What makes you so sure Grady will look the other way this

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time?”

“Because he’s been roughing up the suspect.” She gave Claire an exaggerated wink.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You know, sinking the two ball in the middle pocket.” When Claire continued to frown at her, Kate added, “Paddling up Coochie Creek with our big sister.”

Claire recoiled. “Coochie Creek?”

“Rummaging in Ronnie’s root cellar.”

“Enough, I get it already.” Claire shook her head. “Kate, your brain is trying to knit baby booties these days with one damned needle. You have to stop locking horns with Grady’s deputy. Ernie is the mayor’s son, you know.”

Kate’s eyes narrowed in a squint that would make Billy the Kid shudder. “I don’t care if he’s the Grand Poobah of Fred Flintstone’s Loyal Order of the Water Balloons.”

“It was ‘water buffaloes,’ not balloons.”

Kate pointed at her. “Ronnie’s right. You watched too much television as a kid.”

“I was educating myself in pop culture.”

“This never would’ve happened if you’d have let me go to the store on my own. I told Ronnie and you before, I don’t need a babysitter.”

A dog started barking in Kate’s yoga pants.

Claire’s gaze dipped southward. “Why is your crotch barking at me?”

“It’s not my crotch, it’s Butch.”

Valentine “Butch” Carter was the man responsible for Kate’s baby bump. He’d headed to California after Christmas to spend a few days with his family. Kate was supposed to go with Butch, but at the last minute she’d changed her mind and stayed behind to run The Shaft, the bar Butch owned, which happened to be Jackrabbit Junction’s only watering hole.

Kate claimed someone had to keep The Shaft running during the busy holiday time, but Claire hadn’t just crawled out from under a boulder. Kate was too chicken to meet Butch’s family, plain and simple. Claire couldn’t blame her. If she’d been in Kate’s shoes, she would have hightailed it across the border and hidden in a Mexican mountain village until the baby was due. Commitment and all of the entrapments surrounding it had always given Claire night sweats and hives. Although she had been making progress on staying put in a long-term relationship in spite of these side effects thanks to ...

Ruff! Ruff! Ruff!

“Butch is barking in your pants?” Claire asked. That sounded like a punch line in one of Chester’s dirty jokes.

Kate stuck her hand down the front of her pants and fished out her cell phone. She grinned at Claire. “Deputy Dipshit should have done a pat down before tossing me in the clink.”

“He probably figured you’d have bitten him.”

“He’d have figured right.” The barking continued. “Here, answer it, but don’t tell Butch we’re in jail.” She held the cell phone toward Claire. “He doesn’t need to worry about me while he’s visiting his family.”

Claire reared back. “I’m not touching that after it’s been bumping uglies with your girlie bits.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “I’m wearing underwear, doofus. I’m not Ronnie.”

Their previously refined older sister, Veronica, had somewhat recently been dragged through hell and back. The culprits? Ronnie’s piece of shit ex-husband and a pack of

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determined Feds trying to humiliate the truth out of her about money laundering, drug deals, and other illegal shenanigans that she'd been clueless about during her five years of marriage. These days, Ronnie lived life on the edge, which included screwing around with Grady Harrison, the sheriff of Cholla County, and not wearing skivvies under her yoga pants, much to her family's discomfort on both counts.

"Take it!" Kate grabbed Claire by the wrist and slapped the phone in her hand.

"Ewww, it's warm."

"Grow up, weenie."

Grimacing, Claire hit the answer button and lifted the phone, holding it a couple of inches away from her ear. "Hello?" she whispered, shooting a worried glance toward the front office at the other end of the hall from the holding cells.

"Kate?" Butch asked.

"No, it's Claire," she continued whispering.

Stop whispering! Kate mouthed.

Claire pointed toward the open door to the sheriff's office where Deputy Dipshit was hanging out, waiting for Sheriff Harrison to show up and smear another layer of law and order all over Kate and her.

"What's going on, Claire?" Butch's tone sounded wary.

Kate's recent temporary insanity plea was his fault and he knew it. It turned out Carter babies spurred hormones that ensured their mothers one-way tickets to Wacko Island until they exited the womb.

"Nothing is going on." Claire faked a cough. "I have a cold and lost my voice."

Kate leaned in close, her hair tickling Claire's cheek as she listened in on the conversation.

"Right." Butch wasn't buying her line. "Where's Kate?"

"Um, she's busy right now."

"Oh, no. What kind of trouble is she in?"

Kate made a slicing motion at her throat.

"She's ... uh ... slicing some turkey and can't come to the phone because there is ... uh ... turkey fat on her fingers and in her mouth."

Kate rolled her eyes so hard that her legs almost cartwheeled along with them. Claire flicked her sister on the forehead. If Kate didn't like her excuses, she could shove her phone where the sun didn't shine along with that stupid shopping cart.

There was a moment's pause on the other end of the line filled with Butch's breathing. "Claire, what's going on?"

"Nothing is going on. Everything here is peachy keen."

"Do I need to call Grady?"

Kate shook her head, her expression one big wince.

"No!" Claire shouted. The sound of movement out in the front office made her heartbeat redline. Shit! "I-I ... uh ... I gotta go ... um ... g-go help Kate now. I'll have her call you back in a bit." She hung up and shoved the phone toward Kate's pants. "Hide it!"

"Sheesh! Who taught you how to talk? Porky Pig?" Kate tucked the phone down the front of her pants again.

"You can kiss my porky—"

"Keep it down back there," Deputy Dipshit hollered down the hall from the front office. Claire and Kate sent middle-finger salutes at his back.

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Kate returned to her spot holding up the wall.

“So that’s how you know Gramps is coming,” Claire said. “You texted him.”

“Actually, I texted Ronnie. But she has no money for bail, so she’ll have to bring Gramps.”

In other words, Gramps to the rescue. “Great. He’s going to blow a gasket again and lecture us for a month and a day about obeying the law no matter what.”

“You should try to be more positive, like me.”

“You’re not positive. You’re just nuts.”

“I could whine about not being able to fit in most of my clothes anymore,” Kate continued as if Claire hadn’t spoken. “Instead I focus on the fact that I’m getting bigger tips for waiting tables at The Shaft now that I have a few more curves.”

“Do I need to remind you that the reason we are behind bars currently is because of your sensitivity to comments about your weight?”

She shrugged Claire off as if that was yesterday’s news. “But on a positive note, as long as you’re behind bars, you’re safe from the diamond killer.”

“Shhhhh.” Claire frowned toward the front office. “The sheriff wants us to keep quiet about that, remember?”

A couple of months ago, Claire and Ronnie had found a stash of glass eyeballs in the undercarriage of a camper at the Dancing Winnebagos RV Park, which was owned by their step-grandmother, Ruby Ford. Inside the eyeballs were diamonds, and inside of the camper were two older ladies acting as “mules” who’d recently sneaked the black market stash over the Mexican border. At least that was Ronnie’s theory based off an article she’d found about a mass murder in a border town involving a killer searching for diamonds.

After a series of unfortunate events that started with Claire up to her neck in a water-filled mine shaft and ended with two very dead drug mules, Claire and Ronnie were in a bit of a pickle. First, they had a handful of stolen diamonds. Second, a trail of bread crumbs led to the stupid diamonds. Third, a single-minded bread crumb aficionado was murdering his or her way to the diamonds ... and by association, Claire and Ronnie. The latest victim had bought the dead mules’ camper from a police auction, but that murder had hit the newspapers six weeks ago.

Six very long weeks of Claire watching over her shoulder and diving for cover every time a car backfired.

Sheriff Harrison had taken the diamonds off their hands after Ronnie had spilled the beans about the whole mess, tucking them away for safekeeping. What Grady had done with the stones, Claire didn’t want to know. All she cared about was that he—and the FBI agent in town assigned to keep an eye on Ronnie—kept their firearms handy day and night with their fingers hovering over the triggers.

“Deputy Dipshit can’t hear us,” Kate said, bringing Claire back to her current snafu. “He has too much baloney jammed between his ears.”

She snorted. “That doesn’t make sense, Crazy Kate.”

“Call me crazy again and so help me, the next time you’re sleeping I’ll—”

A buzzing sound from the front office announced the arrival of someone from the world outside, followed by a low rumble of voices. Claire peered out between the bars.

“You think my pizza is here?” Kate joined Claire, sniffing the air. “It doesn’t smell like pizza.”

Ronnie stepped into view at the end of the hallway, her shoulder-length brown hair

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corralled by a red and white polka dot headband that matched her dress. It appeared their sister had been visiting the 1950s before coming to their rescue.

Ronnie rushed down the hall to their cell, her bright red heels clomping on the concrete floor. “What the hell is wrong with you two?”

“It’s good to see you, too, June Cleaver,” Claire said with a grin. “What’re Wally and the Beaver up to this morning?”

“It was the deputy,” Kate said, her chin lifted. “Ernie was out of line again.”

Ronnie growled, lines fanning out from her brown eyes. “Katie, you tried to run the deputy over with a shopping cart for no reason whatsoever.”

“That is not an accurate account of what happened,” Claire said, defending her loony little sister. “Deputy Dipshit goaded Kate, poking the bear repeatedly.”

“And you.” Ronnie turned on Claire. “You tackled an officer of the law. What were you thinking?”

“She tripped.” Kate looked at Claire. “Someone has been blowing smoke up Ronnie’s ying-yang and I’m betting his name rhymes with *lip-spit*.”

Claire scowled at their older sister. “You don’t really believe what the deputy said after our past experiences with him, right?”

“He’s not the one who filled me in on this mess. After I received Katie’s text, Grady called. He’s stuck at an accident scene and told me to come get you two out of his jail.” Her nostrils flared. “Again!”

“Oh, get off your high horse, Ronnie,” Kate said. “It’s not like we haven’t been in jail before.”

“Grady was only repeating his deputy’s big fish stories,” Claire explained.

“Is he letting us off the hook again?” Kate asked.

“For now.” Ronnie crossed her arms. “He’s going to stop by the RV park later and take your statements, then make his decision about what to do with you two.” Ronnie leaned closer, lowering her voice. “Dang it, Claire. You know better than to let Katie near Ernie. How’s this going to look for Grady if he has to keep springing his girlfriend’s sisters from jail? The sheriff of Cholla County is an elected position, you know.”

“Do you think I wanted to come here today?” Claire asked, glaring through the bars. “Do you think Kate and I woke up this morning and said, ‘Let’s screw with Ronnie’s hoity-toity standing as the sheriff’s girlfriend and get thrown in jail,’ huh?”

Ronnie sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Katie might have. She’s had it in for Ernie for months.”

“Hey! He started it,” Kate defended.

“This is your doing, Claire. You’re the sane one. You need to own up to it when Grady comes by later to keep Katie off the radar for now.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Kate agreed.

“You both can shove it.” Claire gripped the bars to keep from strangling her darling sisters. She glared at Ronnie. “You had to go and get involved with a cop. We are Morgans, remember? We’re allergic to badges.”

Ronnie’s face darkened. “I can’t help it. I like Grady.”

“He is sort of cute when he’s not threatening to handcuff me,” Kate said, reaching between the bars to pat Ronnie’s arm.

Babb! Claire growled at the two of them. “You can’t keep up this charade.”

“What charade?” Kate asked.

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“This June Cleaver kiss-ass game Ronnie is playing.”

Ronnie’s chin jutted. “It’s not a charade.”

“Come on, Ronnie.” Kate pressed her face between the bars and whispered, “You’re wearing a dress with polka dots on it.”

“So? It’s a pretty dress.”

Claire scoffed. “It’s not your style and you know it. This is a dress meant to impress the local goody two-shoes. You normally wear jeans and T-shirts and boots.”

“Not always.”

“That’s true,” Kate told Claire. “Back when Ronnie was trying to be Lyle’s perfect, high-gloss wife, she wore fancy dresses and sparkly shoes, remember?”

“What’s next?” Claire asked her older sister. “Are you going to dye your hair blond again and start walking around with a hostess tray, asking if anyone would like more *hors d’oeuvres*?”

Ronnie’s face looked like someone was pinching her in a tender spot. “You don’t understand.”

“Oh, we do, don’t we, Kate?”

Kate nodded. “You’re doing the same thing you did with your ex-husband.”

“Trying to be someone you’re not in order to impress the rest of the world,” Claire added. “I would think that after Lyle’s lies and crimes and philandering, *Veronica*, you’d have learned a lesson about the long-term effects of a counterfeit lifestyle for you and your poor family.”

Ronnie reached through the cell bars and grabbed a handful of Claire’s hair, pulling it. “Take that back!”

“Take what back?” Claire tugged at her wrist. “Let go of me, *Veronica*, or I’ll have you arrested for prisoner abuse.”

“I’m not letting go until you stop calling me that damned name.”

“*Veronica* is your stupid name.” Claire yipped while trying to pull free of her sister’s grip. “Blame Mom if you don’t like it, not me.”

Kate slapped Ronnie’s wrist, making her let go of Claire’s hair. “Stop it, you two. This is not helping the situation.” When Claire and Ronnie kept poking and pinching each other through the bars, Kate snarled, “If you don’t stop it, I’m going to tell Mom that you guys gave Dad’s new girlfriend the cashmere scarf and hat set we originally bought for her.”

“What in Sam Hill is going on back here?” Gramps’s voice boomed from the other end of the hallway. His Army veteran hat sat crooked on his head, like he’d jammed it on in a hurry.

Ronnie pinned Claire with a hard squint before turning toward Gramps. “I was just playing a game of thumb war with Claire while we waited for the deputy to release her and Katie.”

Gramps approached the cell with Deputy Dipshit on his heels. The keys jangled in the deputy’s hand, a wad of toilet paper still jammed up one of his nostrils.

“You sure you don’t want me to lock all three of them up for the night?” he asked Gramps with a nasally voice. His beady eyes roved down Ronnie’s fancy dress, his upper lip wrinkling when his gaze returned northward.

“Tempting, but no,” Gramps said, his light blue eyes nailing each of them in turn.

Ronnie stepped aside so the deputy could open the cell door. “Thank you for letting them out, Deputy.”

Claire ground her molars at the extra dose of sugar in her sister’s tone.

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“Yeah, well, Sheriff Harrison gave me an order, and he is the sheriff.” Ernie grunted and added, “For now, anyway,” under his breath. Deputy Dipshit pulled open the door with an oily smirk. “We wouldn’t want anything like this tarnishing that badge of his, now would we? Especially with an election year coming up and all.”

Ronnie’s cheeks turned bright red, matching her dress. She glared at Claire and then Kate, aiming poisonous darts in their direction.

“Is that some sort of threat, Deputy?” Kate asked, stopping in front of him after exiting the cell.

“No, of course not, Ms. Morgan. Now be sure to take it easy. With that baby coming, you don’t want to get in any accidents. Or should I say, any *more* accidents?”

Kate sputtered. Before she could get a handle on her tongue, Ronnie grabbed her by the arm and dragged her along to the front office. Claire followed after an apologetic frown at Gramps and joined Kate at the main desk, collecting her personal belongings from the basket sitting there.

Something on Deputy Dipshit’s desk snagged Kate’s attention. She took a step toward it.

The front door swung open with a buzz, freezing Kate in her tracks.

“I’m looking for Kate Morgan,” a girl carrying a pizza said. When her gaze landed on Kate, she gaped. “Hey, aren’t you that substitute teacher we had before Christmas break?”

Kate grabbed the pizza and shoved a wad of bills in the girl’s hand. “No, that’s another Kate. I’m her twin sister.”

“Oh wow, I have a twin sister, too.”

Ronnie held open the door. “Everyone out. I’m sure Deputy D—I mean Ernie has a lot of work to do.”

The pizza delivery girl led, with Gramps bringing up the rear. At Gramps’s car, Claire held the back passenger door for Kate and her box of pizza.

“Be careful with that pizza in the car, Crazy Kate. Gramps doesn’t like pizza grease on his white leather seats.”

Kate snarled. “I told you to stop calling me that or I’ll violate you in the middle of the night.”

“Oh yeah, sorry.” Claire mimed zipping her lips and shut the door after her sister.

She rounded the back of Mabel, Gramps’s 1949 souped-up dark blue Mercury with flames painted down her sides. He’d named his car after his first wife, Claire’s grandma, and regarded the piece of steel with almost as much love and care.

“Where’s your car, Katie?” Gramps asked as Mabel rumbled to life.

“Still at the grocery store, I think.”

“I hope you two learned something from this,” he said.

“We sure did,” Kate said, sneaking a bite of pizza. She leaned closer to Claire and breathed pepperoni and mozzarella cheese all over her while whispering, “We learned that Deputy Dipshit has a big problem coming his way. That man should not have messed with the Morgan sisters.”

Claire sighed, shaking her head. “Kate, I’ve spent enough quality time with you in jail to last me a lifetime.”

Her sister’s eyes glittered with a hint of madness as she chewed, looking at least a half bubble off-plumb, if not a whole one. “Don’t worry, Claire. Next time, we’ll be on the other side of the bars looking in at Ernie.”

Claire closed her eyes and groaned. They were going to need to lock Kate in the

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basement for the next five months.