



Ann Charles

TWISTY TORTOISE TUSSLES

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Monday, January 28th

Yuccaville, Arizona

Kathryn Morgan, current president in chief, officially call to order today's emergency meeting of the Prickly Pear Posse to discuss how best to rid this dusty, sunburnt corner of Cholla County, Arizona, of one Deputy Dipshit, aka Ernie the dingleberry bully, who likes to harass innocent young pregnant women and wrongly throw them in jail."

Claire Morgan frowned at her younger sister, who stood at the head of the table in The Mule Train Diner with her chin raised high and her smile wide. Actually, Kate's smile was too wide. Deranged clowns looked less creepy.

"Hold on there, Cuckoo Kate." Claire held up her hand to stop this screwball train before it reached bullet speed. She'd been back in Jackrabbit Junction only a day after spending a few weeks in Tucson. She needed some time to catch her breath, for crissake. "Why are *you* president in chief?"

Kate jammed her hands on her hips, which made her pregnant belly more pronounced under her pink tunic. Her left eye twitched. "Dammit, Claire, I warned you about calling me chubby or cra—"

"I didn't say *crazy*," Claire cut in, motioning for Kate to lower her voice before half of the town of Yuccaville came to see what all the commotion was. As it was, they had the attention of several of the lunch eaters scattered around them, in spite of the late, great Johnny Nash singing loudly through the overhead speakers about how he could see clearly now the rain was gone.

"I said 'cuckoo,' as in one of those cute *slender* birds that were sacred to Hera, the Greek goddess of women and childbirth and family," she explained. "Which, I would like to add, are all things you *should* be focusing on at this precious time in your pregnancy."

Rather than a beady-eyed, crooked sheriff's deputy. Claire kept that last line to herself, having been a witness multiple times to the wild effects of her sister's flip-flopping pregnancy hormones. All it took was one wrong word—or look—and Dr. Jekyll morphed into Mr. Hyde. Or rather *Ms.* Hyde. Then sanity took the first flight south, and Kate started foaming at the mouth.

The wrinkles lining Kate's mob-boss glare deepened as she loomed over Claire. "You are a teller of untruths, Count Fibula, and your trousers have combusted."

Claire held up her wadded paper napkin. "Come any closer, window licker, and I'll plug that hole in the middle of your face."

"Criminy, you two knuckleheads." Their older sister, Ronnie, who sat across the table from Claire, waved her hand between them, playing referee. With the black-and-white striped sweater she was wearing over her black stretch pants, she looked even more the part. "Knock it off. We're in public."

Some things never changed no matter how much time passed, like Claire leaping before

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she looked, Kate not quite telling the *whole* truth, and Ronnie trying to be perfect—as in the perfect daughter, sister, wife, girlfriend, citizen, diner patron, etc., ad nauseam.

Ronnie frowned up at the pink-cheeked watermelon farmer still presiding over the lunch table. “There is no such thing as a president in chief, Katie. It’s commander-in-chief. Now sit back down. You’re making a scene.”

“Claire started it.” Kate sounded as if she were six years old with her blond hair pulled back in pigtails again, instead of cruising toward thirty-two with her wavy curls styled in an elaborately coiffed bun.

Ronnie turned her brown-eyed scowl on Claire. “And you promised you’d stop calling her crazy.”

“I didn’t—” Claire started, but then gave up with a sigh. “Fine. Whatever. But if anyone is the posse’s president, it should be you, Ronnie.”

“Why Ronnie?” Kate asked as she returned to the chair next to Claire.

“Because she’s the oldest.”

Ronnie had Claire by two years and almost two months. Unlike Kate, who took after their mother with her blond hair and blue eyes, Claire and her older sister shared their father’s darker complexion. Only Ronnie was taller, and these days she weighed at least a whole bone-in ham less, especially after months of stress and anxiety repeatedly kicking her in the gut. Where Claire tended to eat carbs and drink beer to escape her problems, Ronnie used yoga, jogging, and gin to find the gumption needed to face the sun each morning.

Huffing, Kate picked up her half-eaten turkey and cranberry pita sandwich. “Officially, Natalie is the oldest.”

Claire shrugged and then stole one of Kate’s pita chips, since she’d already chowed down her meatloaf sub and cheese-stuffed mashed potato balls. “Yeah, well our cousin isn’t in Arizona at the moment, so Ronnie reigns.” She bit the chip in half.

“Maybe Penny should be in charge.” Kate’s gaze shifted to the seat across the table, settling on the brunette with the heart-shaped face sipping from a glass of iced tea. “How old are you, anyway?”

Penelope Harrison was the owner of The Mule Train Diner and the county sheriff’s sister—as in the same Sheriff Harrison who was doing the horizontal hokeypokey with Ronnie when he wasn’t chasing down bad guys or nosing into Claire’s dirty laundry.

A smirk twisted Penny’s face as she set her glass down on the table. “I turned thirty-five last fall, and according to my mother, my baby-making clock is ticking so loudly it’s scaring away the single guys clear over in New Mexico.”

Claire pointed what remained of her chip at her younger sister. “There you have it. Ronnie turns thirty-six next week, so she’s the oldest by far.”

“That doesn’t mean she’s the wisest,” Kate shot back.

Ronnie threw a pickle slice at Claire. “I told you to shush about my birthday.” Another slice hit Kate in the cheek, making her gasp. “And I am by far the wisest over you two nincompoops.”

“Nice, Ronnie.” Claire plucked the pickle off her faded *Calamity Jane for Territorial Governor* T-shirt. “Keep it up and I’ll tell the owner and get you kicked out of here. I hear she’s a real hardass, same as the sheriff.”

Penny chuckled at the play on her last name and grabbed another slice of pickle from Ronnie’s plate, tossing it at Claire, who caught it midair and dropped it next to the first one on her plate.

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“Good catch.” Penny turned to Ronnie. “So, you’re an Aquarius? It’s no wonder my brother is ga-ga about you. He’s a Gemini.”

“What does that mean?” Claire asked, noticing that an older lady with shoulder-length silver hair sitting at the diner’s counter kept glancing their way. Her eyes were dark, her face smooth, contrasting with her silver bangs in a striking way that made Claire stare back. The lady turned away quickly when she ran into Claire’s gaze.

“Ronnie and Grady are both air signs. They’re super compatible and good at communicating.” Penny elbowed Ronnie, grinning. “Aquarius females are also super sexually attracted to Gemini.”

Kate giggled around a mouthful of sandwich, mumbling “Hubba hubba” at Ronnie with an exaggerated wink. Or maybe that was another twitch.

“That would explain her inability to keep her pants on around your brother when they are in *my* Jeep,” Claire said, joining in the teasing.

“I told you we didn’t have sex in there,” Ronnie growled under her breath. “There wasn’t enough room to finish the deed,” she added, shifting in her chair as if reliving the cramped scene. “They need to make the cab space larger for bigger guys.”

Claire wrinkled her nose, trying not to picture the scene Ronnie was painting. “Well, I for one am thankful for that lack of foresight by the Jeep company’s engineering team.”

Ronnie raised her cup of coffee, frowning across the table at both of her sisters. “Okay, enough about Grady and me.” She took a sip. “Let’s get back to why we’re here—Katie apparently has had another run-in with Grady’s deputy and we need to talk her down out of her tree.”

Kate shook her head. “I didn’t have a run-in with Deputy Dipshit.” She took another bite of the sandwich, moaning in appreciation. “This is so good,” she said to Penny around the bite. “Sweet, tart, rich, chewy, and delicious.”

“Thanks,” Penny said while typing something into her cell phone. “I make the mayonnaise fresh each morning and add a few special ingredients to offset the tartness of the cranberries. It’s one of the many things I learned in culinary school in San Francisco.”

“If you didn’t have another altercation with Deputy Dipshit,” Claire said to Kate, “then why did you insist we have this meeting?”

Kate swallowed before answering, taking a moment to wipe away the glob of mayonnaise on the corner of her mouth with her napkin. “Because we need to take him down a notch or two before his britches get any bigger.”

Ronnie shook her head, groaning. “Katie, we’ve gone over this before. It’s not your job to put Deputy Dip—I mean, Grady’s deputy—in his place.”

“According to one of my favorite astrology sites,” Penny cut in, reading from her phone’s screen, “Aquarius females often seem rebellious. They are known for their tempers, so you don’t want to piss them off. While they don’t get mad easily, all hell breaks loose when they do and someone might lose a limb.”

Kate snorted. “That is so you, Ronnie.”

“That is not like me at all, Katie.”

Claire grinned. “It sort of is. Remember what you did to that waitress who clocked me outside The Shaft last fall?”

“That was different. She was a well-known killer threatening to kidnap and torture you for information.”

“True, but still, you didn’t know she had a deadly reputation at the time.”

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Penny was still focused on her phone. “Here’s your horoscope for today, Ronnie.” She cleared her throat and read, “You will meet a new purpose that will lead you down a different path if you choose to follow it. Only those who take chances succeed.”

“That sounds like something from a fortune cookie,” Ronnie said, scowling.

“Sort of,” Penny said. “But fortune cookies are typically more vague with wisdom like, ‘Now is a good time to travel,’ or ‘A stranger will provide the answer to your problems.’”

Claire snickered, adding, “Or something like, ‘Today is a good day to wear underwear,’ which is something we all agree upon for Captain Commando here.”

“All but Grady,” Kate blurted, following it with a giggle.

Ronnie rolled her eyes. “I told you two bozos to zip it about my underwear.”

“That horoscope is spot-on for why I called this posse meeting,” Kate took a sip of her lemonade. “Ronnie, you need to help me take down Deputy Dipshit. Teamed up with Claire and Penny, the four of us will make a killer posse.”

“And do what?” Ronnie leaned forward, whispering now. “Invite him to a lone-tree necktie party and dress him up in a piñata suit?”

Kate cringed. “Sheesh. Violent much? We’re not some vigilante hemp committee here. I was thinking more along the lines of convincing Ernie to climb into his stupid monster truck and leave town for good.”

Claire glanced toward the counter. The old woman sitting there was watching them again, this time via the reflection in the chrome napkin holder, in between perusing a newspaper and eating fruit from the bowl in front of her. Claire watched as she stabbed the fork into the bowl, snaring first a grape and then a piece of cantaloupe.

Something about the lady had Claire feeling fidgety, but what? The voyeur’s worn flannel coat, baggy faded jeans, and muddy combat boots seemed a typical clothing style for many of the locals here in Yuccaville. She shrugged. It was probably nothing more than curiosity after overhearing snippets of the conversation coming from their table. With Claire’s notorious history for paranoia, she decided to keep her unease to herself and returned her attention to Kate’s posse nonsense.

“Kate, what’s your sign?” Penny asked, holding up her phone.

“I’m a happy little Cancer crab,” she said, popping a chip in her mouth.

“Cancer, of course.” Penny laughed lightly.

“Why is that funny?” Claire asked.

“Well, Cancers are super devoted to their loved ones.”

“Yep, that’s me. Family is everything.”

“So devoted, in fact,” Penny continued, “that they will go to amazing, unhealthy lengths to protect and defend them, no matter the cost physically or mentally.”

Ronnie nodded. “Such as chasing down a serial killer through the side streets of Yuccaville while she’s four months pregnant and armed with only a taser gun.”

“That’s not entirely true.” Claire stole another chip from Kate. “She had Deputy Dipshit’s handgun when she faced off with the killer in the alley.”

Ronnie groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

“They are also known for their cheerful disposition,” Penny said, “and ability to sniff out a fake. And they won’t hesitate to poke a bear repeatedly when they perceive a problem.”

“Which is a great reason to stay far away from Deputy Dipshit,” Ronnie said, leveling her gaze on Kate. “Right?”

“Wrong,” Kate shot back. “He’s a fake and I know it. My mother’s intuition is cranked

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up on high now, you know. You guys need to trust me on this. He's behind those anonymous threatening letters left on Gramps's Winnebago last month, and he's out to hurt Grady's career."

"Kate will make a great mom." Penny's attention turned to Claire. "What about you? What's your sign?"

"She's an Aries," Kate said.

Penny typed on the phone's screen, then looked across at Claire. "Fiery, hardworking, clever, independent, and stubborn."

Kate clapped her hands. "Nailed it."

"I'm not fiery," Claire grumbled.

Although the independent part was accurate. That very independence was what had made committing to a relationship so hard for most of her adult life. Hell, until Mac had shown up and won her over, she'd had a bad habit of running far and fast from any form of commitment. Now she was buying a bar with Mac. Even more surprising, after spending the last few weeks planning their future together while he finished up at his job in Tucson, she couldn't wait to get started on what came next for them.

"You're not really clever either," Ronnie said, and then dodged when Claire reached across to pinch her forearm.

"Nobody works harder than this girl, that's for sure," Kate said, patting Claire on the head like she was a good egg. "And she's like a dog on the hunt when it comes to sniffing out assholes."

Claire pulled away from Kate, grimacing. "I don't think that came out as the compliment you intended."

"Or maybe it did," Ronnie said, chuckling. She pushed her chair back, standing. "I need to run to the little girls' room. Be right back."

The old lady at the counter glanced at Ronnie as she passed on the way to the restrooms at the back of the diner. Claire tried to decide if it was merely curiosity on the lady's part or something more.

Ronnie's ex-husband had caused a lot of problems lately from his cozy cell in the country club-style prison for the rich and criminal up in South Dakota. He'd rolled over on some nasty kingpins who liked to take out their revenge by shipping loved ones' body parts via the postal service. A finger here, an earlobe there, maybe a kneecap as a bonus. While Ronnie and her ex were completely split up with no love left between them, Lyle's enemies didn't seem to know or care about that, which made Ronnie a prime target for revenge.

"You said your birthday was last fall," Kate said to Penny, who nodded. "What's your sign?"

Penny's smile had a hard edge to it. "November 5th, which makes me a Scorpio."

"As in the scorpion," Claire added. "Unpredictable and deadly."

Penny let out a deep, evil-sounding laugh, touching the tips of her fingers together. "Don't forget cold-blooded. We make excellent assassins."

"Great!" Kate said, shoving her empty plate away. "We could use a sniper and a ruthless kidnapper for the Deputy Dipshit job."

Claire did a double take. "Now, hold on for a damned minute, Kate. I know you aren't a fan of Ernie's, but you need to bring this revenge business down to a sane level or you're going to wind up in jail again with the bail set so high that your sugar daddy can't cover it."

"I'm not going to shoot him," Kate said, as if Claire was the nutter at the table.

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“Well, that’s a relief.”

“At least not with an actual gun.”

Penny aimed a set of raised eyebrows Claire’s way. “Uh, Kate,” she said, placing her phone on the table. “Have you talked to Butch about any of this?”

“Of course not. Why would I? He’s the father of my child, not my keeper.”

“Aren’t you engaged?” Penny asked.

Kate crossed her arms. “No.”

“But not because of a lack of asking on his part,” Claire explained to Penny.

“His proposals have been half-assed at best.” Kate frowned down at the table. “Besides, I’m not ready to be shackled just yet.”

“I don’t think he plans to shackle you,” Claire said. “Unless that’s some kind of kinky sex game you two are into these days.”

Kate shot her a sideways glare. “We’re not like Ronnie and Grady with their handcuffs and spiky leather collars.”

Claire cringed. “Spiky leather collars?”

A gagging sound came from Penny. “Come on, Kate. That’s my brother we’re talking about. I don’t even like to watch him kiss your sister.”

“I don’t know for sure on the collars, but I found one in the back seat of Grady’s pickup once.”

“What were you doing in Grady’s back seat?” Claire asked.

Kate’s left eye twitched. She looked toward the counter. “Uh, just looking for a map.”

Claire glanced at Penny. “Did that site about astrology signs say anything about Cancers being big fat fibbers, too?”

“They do tend to swing from one emotional extreme to the next.” Penny held up her index finger. “Oh, that reminds me, Aunt Millie wanted me to give something to you, Kate.” She hopped up and jogged to the end of the counter, reaching over it and coming back to the table with a small gift bag tied closed with a pink ribbon. “She said it’s for the baby and that you’d know what to do with it.”

Claire stared at Kate, whose cheeks had suddenly turned dark pink. “Why is Grady’s and Penny’s aunt Millie giving you a gift? You two don’t like each other.”

Kate avoided looking at her, peeking inside the edge of the bag. “That’s not true. We reached a peace accord over the holidays. We’re cozy as bugs in a rug now.”

Claire crossed her arms. “I don’t believe that.”

“Why not? You don’t think I can bury the hatchet?”

“Sure you can, especially in the back of your enemies, and a short time ago Millie was just that.” Claire reached for the bag. “What’s in there?”

Kate jerked away, holding the bag out of reach. “None of your bus—”

A pounding noise over at the counter snagged their attention.

The old woman who’d been playing voyeur was bent over, her shoulders hitching as she slammed her fist on the counter.

“Hey, is she ...” Claire started, standing so fast her chair fell over.

Ronnie came running from the back of the diner, sliding to a stop next to the old woman. “Are you choking?” she asked, grasping the woman’s shoulder.

Claire couldn’t see if she responded, but Ronnie slid around behind the woman, performing the Heimlich maneuver on her. Claire had taken a step toward them when something popped out of the old woman’s mouth and dropped onto the floor.

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A grape rolled to a stop next to the base of the neighboring bar stool.

The older woman gasped and then coughed, holding onto the counter as she re-entered the world of the breathing.

Penny joined Ronnie at the counter. "Are you okay, ma'am? Can I get you anything?"

"Water," she answered, her voice husky. She took the glass Penny held out to her, drinking several gulps and then setting it down. "Thanks," she said to Penny, then turned to Ronnie, who was still hovering at her shoulder. "I owe you a life. Thank you."

Ronnie's frown probably matched Claire's. *A life?* That sounded like something from a video game.

"You don't owe me anything, ma'am. I'm glad I could help."

The lady pulled a fanny pack from under her flannel jacket and unzipped it, pulling out a wad of bills. "Take this as a thanks."

"That's a big wad," Kate whispered in Claire's ear.

Ronnie pushed the money away, shaking her head. "Really, you don't owe me anything. I'm glad I could help."

"I'd like to repay you somehow," the lady pressed.

"I won't accept your money. Your thanks is enough."

The old woman's dark eyes narrowed slightly. "We'll see." She tossed several bills on the counter to cover her lunch costs before stuffing the wad of cash back in her fanny pack. After a nod at Penny, she headed for the door, leaning heavily on her cane, which creaked with every step.

The door had barely closed when it was pushed open again, the bells overhead jingling doubly.

A petite blonde in a bright red curve-hugging coat and rhinestone-studded sunglasses strutted into the diner. Her sneer started when her gaze landed on Penny and changed into an all-out snarl when it settled on Ronnie.

"Well, well, well," the blonde said. "Look who we have here patronizing my sister-in-law's diner."

Is that ...

"Elizabeth," Kate whispered the answer to Claire's unspoken question. She leaned closer to Claire. "What a suspicious coincidence, don't you think?"

"What do you mean?"

As the blonde made a point of slowly taking off her black leather gloves, Kate filled Claire's ear with a breathy explanation. "What are the chances of Grady's skanky ex-wife being here in Penny's diner at the same time as us? Deputy Dipshit is probably using her as a spy."

Claire pulled away and scowled at her sister. "You need to get a new hobby, Nancy Drew. Maybe have your new best friend, Millie, teach you how to knit some baby booties."

Elizabeth pocketed her gloves, speaking loud and clear for all in the diner to hear. "I have a proposition for you, Penny."

"I'll let you two catch up," Ronnie said, taking a step toward the table.

A rustling sound came from Kate's direction as she stuffed the gift bag from Aunt Millie under her chair.

"Oh, you can stay right where you are, trollop," Elizabeth told Ronnie. "This is about *you*, after all."

"Did she just call Ronnie a dollop?" Kate had returned to Claire's side.

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“Not dollop, you doof. Trollop.”

Something jabbed Claire in the ribs, making her grunt.

“Don’t call me a doof, you boob.”

“Shhhh.”

“What do you want, Liz?” Penny asked, a muscle pulsing in her jaw. Her gaze was razor sharp and pointed.

“Ohhh, there’s the scorpion,” Kate said in Claire’s ear.

“I’ll make this simple enough for you to understand, *Pen.*” She pointed at Ronnie. “Either she exits from Grady’s life or you do.”

“Me?” Penny touched her chest. “Where am I going?”

“To the poorhouse after I destroy your reputation in this town and your diner business dries up, sending you rolling toward the horizon like a tumbleweed.” Elizabeth pushed her hair back from her face, her smile ghoulishly toothy. “I’ll give you some time to consider my proposition, but you know as well as I do whose family runs this town. If you want to keep your little business here intact, along with your brother’s reputation and badge, you’ll pick the side of the right woman for Grady’s future.”

After shooting a glare in Kate and Claire’s direction, Elizabeth turned and flounced back out the door.

“Christ,” Ronnie muttered, returning to the table and falling into her chair. “I really don’t like that bitch.”

Penny joined them. “She’s always been like that. Head high school cheerleader with a rich granddaddy who was a superintendent at the mine. Her uppity grandmother owns the country club at the edge of town. I don’t know what Grady ever saw in her.” She scowled toward the door. “Actually, I don’t think he had much choice after she set her sights on him and sank her claws in good and deep.”

“She’s like an Alabama tick,” Claire muttered, not liking the tension lining Ronnie’s face now, or how she was twisting her napkin as if it were a certain blonde’s neck.

Penny smirked. “You sound like Aunt Millie. She’s wanted to take Elizabeth down a notch or two since she screwed Grady over years ago.”

Oh, really? Claire wondered if Millie was serious or just swaggering for show.

Kate tapped her finger on the table. “Well, bloodsucker or not, she should know better than to mess with the Prickly Pear Posse.” The whole left side of Kate’s face spasmed for a second or two.

“Oh, hell,” Claire muttered, exchanging a worried look with Ronnie.

Ms. Hyde was back.