

LIVE Ammo

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Merritt Island, Florida, 3:26 p.m.

Butch and Jose hunkered over the pile of twigs at the curb, while Kyle kept lookout. The boys were first-grade classmates, neighbors, and partners in crime. Jose and Kyle were dark-headed, their skin tanned to a golden copper by the Florida summer sun. Butch, with his sweaty mop of red hair and liberal sprinkling of freckles, was the undisputed leader of the pack. The asphalt street was hot enough to fry eggs, but the boys didn't notice.

Butch pulled the box of matches out of his shorts pocket. His serious expression turned into one of smug satisfaction when the other boys gasped.

"Where'd you get 'em?" Jose asked, impressed.

"My mom." Butch opened the box and extracted a single wooden match.

"She gived them to you?"

"Nah, I got 'em out of a drawer."

Kyle forgot his role as lookout, squatting down beside the others. "Won't you get in trouble?" he asked, his eyes

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riveted on the match in Butch's hand as if it might self-combust at any second.

"She lets me do what I want." That comment prompted a moment of respectful silence from the others.

Butch waited until they twitched with impatience. Then, he held the match and box out in front of him, his brow wrinkled in concentration. The first time he struck the match against the side of the box, nothing happened. His tongue came out of his mouth and over his upper lip as he focused on the task. Another strike and the match flared brightly. Butch jumped back, and it fell from his hand, extinguishing on the pavement.

Cheeks crimson with embarrassment, he extracted another match. "That one was too hot," he told the others. As Butch's hand neared the striking surface again, Jose gasped.

Butch's head swiveled in the direction Jose looked, and he saw a man moving along the strip of grass near the canal running behind the houses. The boys were poised for flight, but the man only glanced at them before moving on.

Butch blew a breath of relief. As leader, he was responsible to see they didn't get busted. He waited another minute to make sure the coast was clear. Just as he lifted the match to the box, a car rounded the corner.

This time, he didn't wait to see what would happen. He knew that car. "*Run*," he shouted at the others, scrambling to his feet. No time to grab the wood. He raced between two houses and slid down the shallow grass embankment on the near side of the canal, Jose hot on his tail. He looked around, but Kyle was nowhere to be seen.

After a minute, curiosity overrode caution, and he inched back up the rise. The sheriff stopped and got out of his car. He walked over to the pile of kindling and stared down at it. Butch was too far away to make out the look on his face, but he was sure it was mean. They'd lived next

door to the sheriff for a long time. He always looked mean when Butch was bad.

As Butch peered over the grassy rise, the sheriff leaned over and picked up something. The matches. Butch must have dropped them. Shaking his head, the sheriff stuck them in his shirt pocket and gathered up the little pile of wood. A minute later, he climbed back in his car and idled down to his driveway.

Butch scrubbed his eyes with clenched fists. He was cooked. The sheriff would tell his mother. Not only that, but now the sheriff had Butch's fingerprints. They'd probably arrest him and put him in jail. He'd never see his mom again, or his sister Missy. Tears pricked his eyes, but he didn't give in. He was the man of the house now—that's what his mom told him when his dad left—and men don't cry. Not real men.

He got to his feet, knowing he had to face his crime. "Go home," he told Jose. He didn't have to say it twice. Jose took off as if his heels were on fire.

As Butch trudged behind the houses toward his yard, he saw the man who'd walked past right before the sheriff came. He was slipping around the corner real sneaky-like. Maybe he was a burglar. If Butch could stop him, maybe the sheriff would forget about the matches.

By the time Butch got to the corner of the sheriff's house, the man had disappeared from view. Butch looked around for a weapon. Nothing. He raced into his garage and grabbed a shovel, holding it like a baseball bat. Then, there was a loud bang. People started yelling, and Butch's mother raced out of the house. She grabbed him by the back of his shirt collar. "Get inside, Butch! Run inside and lock the door. *Hurry!*"

Butch dropped the shovel, staring at her open-mouthed. She snatched him and ran, holding him under her arm like a football. She tossed him on the couch and ran to see if the

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doors and windows were locked. After a few minutes, Butch heard a siren screaming in the distance. Then another.

Allie Grainger flattened herself against the stove as her front door slammed open, and visions of maniacs waving guns filled her head.

“Jesus, Allie, I gotta tell you—oh, *shit! Damn!*” came the voice from the living room.

Allie exhaled and shook her head. “Hello, Sheryl. I didn’t hear you knock.”

Sheryl rounded the doorway into the kitchen. “Why the hell did you leave your shoes in the middle of the floor?”

“Because it’s my floor,” Allie said with a glance over her shoulder.

Sheryl wore a tiny bikini and nothing else. Somehow, even with her hair piled carelessly on top of her head and sweat dripping down the sides of her face, she looked good. At thirty, with olive skin and masses of dark hair that curled and waved without chemical assistance, Sheryl had a body that made grown men stammer, even when it was clothed; the face of an angel; and the mouth of—well, a cop. Sophia Loren meets Rambo.

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Sheryl snorted. “You oughta put the damned things away. Someone could get killed. And I did knock. Sort of. Or I would have if your door had been locked.”

It was an old battle. Sheryl was her best friend since childhood. The two women reunited when Allie moved back to Cape Canaveral after her divorce from her diplomat husband, a man with the face of Adonis and the morals of an alley cat. Sheryl now lived less than a block from Allie, thanks to a loan Allie forced on her. If Sheryl’s primary mission in life was protecting Brevard County’s citizens, her second seemed to be protecting Allie from herself. Sometimes, she almost succeeded.

“I gotta tell you what happened,” Sheryl blurted out.

Allie ignored her, filling a pot with water from a jug on the counter. Cape Canaveral tap water was vile, reeking of sulfur with undertones of... who knew what. “Why in the world were you sunbathing in this heat? It must be a hundred degrees outside.”

“What? Shit, a girl’s gotta keep up her tan. Never mind that. You won’t believe what happened.”

“Try me.”

“The sheriff’s wife blew her brains out.”

Allie froze with the pot halfway to the burner as Sheryl’s words penetrated her brain. “That’s not funny.”

Sheryl rested a bronze hip against the counter, her face smug. “I didn’t say it was funny. Happened about half an hour ago.”

“How do you know?”

“Heard it over the radio.”

Allie looked at Sheryl’s bikini. “Where did you have the radio?”

Sheryl made a rude sound. “On the chair beside me. Jeez, you want to hear this or not?”

Allie led the way into the dining room, a tiny nook off the kitchen large enough for a small table and two chairs. Sheryl plopped down at her usual place.

“Tell me,” Allie said, sinking down across from her.

“When the call came for the wagon, I thought the address sounded familiar, so I called Sidney. Figured he’d know what was happening if anyone would.”

Sidney Finch. An old nemesis of theirs from Allie’s childhood days. She hadn’t seen him in a decade or more, but she knew he was another of the old crowd who’d gone to work for the sheriff’s office.

“Sidney said the sheriff got home from the firing range and heard a gunshot as he got out of the car. Found his wife on the kitchen floor.”

“Oh, God.” Allie closed her eyes. It wasn’t as if she knew the woman. Still, to think of a human being so desperate to end her life that she put a gun to her head and squeezed the trigger... She shuddered.

“That’s not the best of it,” Sheryl said.

Allie’s eyes flew open. “There is no *best* of it.”

“Okay. Juicy, then. God, you’re prickly. Must be the heat.”

Allie narrowed her eyes.

“Yeah, well. So, the sheriff and his son got into some kind of big blowout. Son tried to run into the kitchen, and the sheriff had to physically restrain him. They ended up on the kitchen floor in all the blood and gore.”

“They were actually fighting?”

“That’s what Sidney said. Scene is a fucking mess I hear. I’m going over there. Thought you might want to ride along.”

“Me? Why me?”

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“You’re a reporter, aren’t you?”

Allie felt that labeling her a reporter was stretching it. She had a background in journalism, and the *Brevard Sun* had recently hired her—out of pity or guilt, she wasn’t sure which. She’d only accepted the job because her life seemed devoid of purpose.

Embarrassing as it was to admit now, her marriage had been her purpose. When it blew up, she was rudderless. God knew what she’d be doing if her aunt’s death hadn’t brought her back to Cape Canaveral. Still, a reporter? Her newspaper efforts to date consisted of sitting behind a desk for eight interminable hours a day, trying to spruce up the real reporters’ stories. She had yet to venture out in the field, and the paper would have dispatched a real reporter long before now.

“I don’t know, Sheryl.”

Sheryl must have misunderstood her hesitation. “Hey, it’ll be okay. For all they know, we were riding around when I called. So, I stop by with my friend to see if they need me. What’s wrong with that? You should go. This is news, probably the biggest news in this county in years.” She stopped, no doubt remembering big news not so many months ago. When she continued, her voice was more sober. “Anyhow, you want to come?”

Allie looked down at her shorts and tank top. “Can you give me a couple of minutes? I’ll have to change.”

“Well, duh. I’m sure as hell not going like this.” Sheryl gestured at her bikini. “No place to stick the gun, and who knows what might happen.”

That gave Allie pause. Both she and Sheryl saw enough violence six months ago to last them a lifetime, but it was what Sheryl did for a living, and if Allie planned to be any kind of reporter—which she secretly doubted—she’d better get used to it.

Sheryl stopped halfway to the door and stared at Allie. “You look beat. Hard day at the office?”

Allie blew her bangs out of her eyes. “Hard week at the office, and it’s only Tuesday.”

“You could quit, you know. It’s not like you have to work.”

Another old argument. “Go get dressed, Sheryl. I’ll meet you outside.”

* * *

Red and blue lights flashed everywhere. If it were night, Allie would swear Ringling Brothers had come to Merritt Island. She counted no fewer than six EMS trucks—which seemed excessive unless a bloodbath had followed the suicide—and police cars and fire engines stretched as far as the eye could see in both directions. Instead of a tragedy, it had all the earmarks of a media event. TV vans, their satellite dishes pointed skyward, had disgorged their crews. Well-coiffed heads of both sexes craned in every direction as if hoping for another bit of bloodshed.

Sheryl bolted out of her Honda CRV and headed straight toward the cluster of officers near the front door. Allie took it more slowly, knowing she had no real right or reason to be there. As she stepped out of the car, scorching air blasted her face. Not only was Florida suffering from the hottest summer on record, but also the East Coast was experiencing the longest drought in years.

The neighborhood looked desolate, with yards seared by the relentless sun and even the hardiest Florida vegetation sagging lifelessly toward the parched ground. Heat shimmered off the asphalt street in visible waves. People with any sense hid indoors, faces lifted reverently to air-conditioning vents, which might be why only a few curious neighbors stood on their lawns watching the goings-on. Or maybe they hid inside, unsure if the gunplay was over.

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Allie recognized Alf Reed from the paper, with his knife-edge features and thinning hair, looking hungry as always. If he noticed Allie, he gave no sign, but it was no more than she expected. He barely looked at her in the newsroom, and the most he'd offered by way of a friendly overture was, "Hey, kid. How ya hangin'?" A man of few spoken words and no social graces. Still, much as it galled Allie to admit it, Alf was a veteran reporter whose copy, overly sensational though it might be, required little if any line editing.

She edged around the action's perimeter, watching as the drama unfolded. A lot of movement seemed to be going on in the kitchen, but Allie couldn't make out what was happening. Two officers standing near the front door glanced her way but seemed to consider her no threat and turned back to the action. She recognized the sheriff standing near the front stoop, arms crossed in front of him as he ignored the questions reporters lobbed at him from all sides. No gore on his clothes. He must have changed.

Two men stood about ten feet away, one in sheriff's deputy garb with his back to her and one in civilian clothes who looked vaguely familiar. Someone else she'd grown up with? She hadn't been back long enough to reconnect with many. From where she stood, it seemed the officer was holding the civilian at bay, although no guns were drawn.

The uniformed man turned in her direction. Lean and not as tall as the civilian, he wore mirrored sunglasses and that impassive expression that seemed to go with a cop's job description. Whoever he was, his invisible eyes seemed to bore into Allie, and she felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. He stared at her until a commotion at the front door pulled his attention away. A metal gurney came into view. On it was a bag, black and zipped closed. The crowd parted like the Red Sea as the medics guided the gurney down the driveway, its load bumping soundlessly when they reached the street.

Allie's stomach lurched. She looked away and right into the next-door neighbor's window. A curtain fell back into place, but not before Allie saw a shock of reddish hair and a small freckled face with eyes the size of saucers.

* * *

Sheryl talked nonstop on the drive home, but Allie barely heard her. She kept seeing that child's face. What a terrible thing to witness at any age, but that boy had been—what? Six? Seven? Had he heard the gunshot? The sirens growing louder as they neared? The poor child would have nightmares for a long time.

“Earth to Allie.”

“I'm sorry. What?”

“You want to stop and grab a bite?”

Allie thought about it for a minute, but knew she couldn't eat. Seeing that body bag had brought it all back. The gunshots. The blood. The noise. “No, I'm exhausted. Besides, I need to feed Spook and take him out. Why don't you drop me at home?”

Once inside, she flipped the deadbolt on the front door. She knew Sheryl was right about keeping her door locked. Crime happened everywhere. Allie had firsthand experience to confirm that, and Cape Canaveral wasn't the sleepy little town it once was during the years when she visited her aunt here every summer. It was known around the world for its proximity to the Kennedy Space Center, but few realized it was home to more than ten thousand inhabitants. Even the area code—321—was a result of its connection with the space program, as in 3-2-1-liftoff.

Allie remembered when the tallest building in Cape Canaveral was one story, when the streets were largely unpaved, and Port Canaveral boasted only shrimp boats and a few pleasure craft, not the massive cruise ships that

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lined the docks now. Those early years, those summers spent with her Aunt Lou, shaped Allie's life.

Allie's grief at her aunt's death from Hodgkin's was worsened because she was living in Belgium watching her marriage come apart when the call came from her parents. She even missed the funeral when she couldn't get a flight back in time. Without her marriage or her aunt's shoulder to cry on about its demise, her inheritance determined her next rudderless steps.

Lou left everything to Allie, a point of contention with Allie's mother, who thought Allie's brother Len should have gotten at least half. Allie was shocked when the attorney told her the paid-for house came with more than two million dollars. He failed to mention the terrified Lhasa Apso Lou had adopted—twelve pounds of furry canine cowardice who spent most of his time behind the living room sofa. Allie knew nothing about animals, and she probably would have thought the dog normal if the vet hadn't explained that Spook had been abused and abandoned on a roadside before her aunt took him in. The only lasting effect seemed to be an overwhelming fear of everyone and everything.

A few months ago, she'd thought Spook was coming around, hardly even trembling when Allie snapped on his leash. Then, the neighbors on either side of her sold their houses to land developers, and demolition began for the high-rise condos that would soon dwarf her one-story house. Now, she'd added construction noise to the list of Spook's terrors. She was glad it had stopped for the day. Spook even screwed up his courage and greeted Allie when she came out of the bedroom after changing, his fluffy corkscrew tail twitching a welcome. He and Allie were both learning much about the need to face fears in order to get over them.

She grabbed a diet soda from the refrigerator and scooped Spook under her arm before letting herself out the back door and climbing the wrought iron stairs to the rooftop deck. Her aunt had installed the deck when Allie

was a kid, saying if she was going to have oceanfront property, she was “by God, going to be able to see the ocean.” From the ground level, the dunes and sea grasses blocked the view of the beach and the shoreline, but “it was the breakers that soothed,” Lou maintained. If she wanted to see a strip of blue, she could paint it on her window glass and save herself a lot of money. A joke, Allie now realized.

She stretched out on a lounge chair and put Spook on the deck beside her. The breeze began to pick up a bit, blowing cool against Allie’s hot face. She rubbed the soda can against her forehead to speed up the process. Evening was settling in now. Seagulls and broad-winged pelicans glided soundlessly over the purple-gray water, searching for dinner, barely visible in the afternoon sun’s last glowing rays. The breeze coming off the water rippled over Allie’s skin, cooling her. She could hear the ocean below, the subtle roar as the waves broke on the beach, the whisper as they spread out across the sand. God’s white noise; Allie’s favorite music.

Out on the horizon, a tiny white speck made its steady way toward Port Canaveral—a cruise ship returning from its latest adventure. In the morning, it would spill its travelers onto the dock, and they would go their separate ways, new best friends promising to e-mail or call, never to be heard from again.

The day wound down; the light softened. Soon, it would be night. Allie would go downstairs, crawl into bed, and spend most of the night thinking about love and loss, while the sheriff’s wife lay on a table in the morgue, thinking nothing at all.

The thought made Allie shiver. She picked up the sunglasses her aunt had left sitting on the table by her usual chair almost a year before and put them on. They were warped now and useless. She should have thrown them away long ago, but she couldn’t bear to do it.

“Throw the old things away.”

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Allie ignored the voice in her head. Imagination, she had believed at the beginning.

“They’re just sunglasses, Allie.”

“No, they’re not. They’re your sunglasses.”

“Oh, honey.”

The hollow ache inside her grew. Louise Smith had been more than an aunt. She’d been Allie’s best friend, her hero, her mother of choice. Allie’s parents never liked Lou, mainly because the woman went her way without permission or apology. They shipped Allie off to stay with her in Florida every summer because it suited them. Allie couldn’t remember any of her family saying one kind thing about Lou. It never bothered her aunt, but even as a child, Allie had felt the slight.

Louise Smith had been an amazing woman, taking what life tossed at her with a philosophical shrug and a laugh. She respected and even celebrated the differences in others and would fight fiercely to protect her right to her own. She was fun, making even a simple excursion to the mall an adventure. During her life, she was endlessly kind and loving.

And she was Sheriff Cord Arbutten’s lover.