

The Socorro Blast

Chapter 1

If hell exists, it's filled with old boyfriends . . . and a cat.

I added another bandage to the three bloody lines of mismatched adhesives now adorning my right forearm. Shocked from a sound sleep, Leo da Cat had inflicted the scratches in retaliation for my abrupt waking from yet another nightmare about hitherto heartthrobs including unremembered heroes like the guy with the baking-soda white hair and new-grass green eyes, or the one with the banana-soft face and lips the size of plump tomato worms.

For the past two weeks, every bad relationship—from high school through yesterday—had shimmied into position, vying for the privilege of torturing me the minute my eyelids kissed. Alas, though too experienced in the game of love, I'd never won, or learned how to lose with grace.

Failed liaisons littered my life like spring pollen on a windy day. My anaphylactic reactions of anger didn't help. Slammed doors, defaced conference tables, anonymous phone calls to police stations in the middle of the night—well, let's just say love hath no fury greater than a girlfriend wronged. Or, one who perceives she's been wronged. Or, one who gets tired of somebody's whining . . .

Though Hades charred my blameworthy subconscious with visions of Herbies, Sams and Mikes past, the true instigator of this current inferno was a certain Peter O'Neill, Director of New Mexico's Poison Control Center. Peter O'Neill. He of the Baikal-blue eyes and *mole*-brown hair. He who'd informed me a fortnight ago about his impending move to Maryland to take a new job. The premonition our relationship wouldn't last must've nibbled on some level because I'd never given him a key to my place. Still, this was the first decent lovership in my life and it would end before I could even ruin it.

A glance in the bathroom mirror made me sigh. Puffy bags under my eyes smudged charcoal dull. Minute capillaries around my nose had begun to pop, leaving maps in my skin of places usually accessible only to mountain climbers. It didn't help that I'd gained five pounds eating chocolate since Peter's revelation.

Exasperated, demoralized, and feeling yucky, I went back to sleep, dreaming of hands, my hands, clasping a screwdriver and stabbing thirteen holes in an ex-boyfriend's waterbed.

The phone rang, robbing me of the remembered satisfaction of his surprise. Without turning on the light, I mumbled an annoyed greeting.

"Sasha, what's happened?" Darnda's concern slid under my skin. She'd been my closest friend for years and had a knack for sensing disaster. That, combined with the fact that she'd recently become a major client, kept me from hanging up.

"It's two a.m. That's what happened." Sure, my response could have been a tad more cordial, but she'd disturbed the first good dream in days.

“No. I mean it. *What’s* happened?”

“How the hell do I know, Darnda? It’s still dark out.” Leo dug his claws into my thigh. They made a ripping sound when yanked from the flannel. Dumped on the floor with an unceremonious thud, he flicked his tail at me and walked out of the room. “Maybe you’re picking up on someone else.”

“No, it’s definitely you.” She cleared her throat two times, ending with a small cough. That sound meant trouble. It ferried a black shiver from the untreated roots on my head to my unclipped toenails. “It’s bad, Sasha, really bad.”

Did I mention that Darnda is psychic? Her hunches and visions twanged with bull’s-eye accuracy. Mine, on the other hand, shot past every target like malfunctioning missiles.

Well, upcoming doom wouldn’t fit into my schedule today. An eighteen-wheeler full of work parked in my office, demanding attention before I hit the road for tomorrow’s public relations consulting job in Socorro. If the weathermen were wrong, and it *didn’t* snow, first thing Tuesday morning I’d grin-and-skin with a passel of tourist industry bigwigs at a super-planning meeting. Hundreds of miles awaited my analysis and masterminding to bring beaucoup bucks to one of New Mexico’s most interesting counties.

On top of work, my youngest niece, Gabriela aka *Gabi*, had invited me to spend the weekend with her. It’d be fun to hang out with a twenty-one-year-old grad student for a couple of days, to see the world through fresh eyes again. And, maybe I’d shed the dusty remorse that clung to my everyday life. If guilt about former boyfriends etched creeks into my subconscious, the gunk flowed in wide corrosive rivers through my waking hours when it came to family. The vestiges of Mom’s numerous strokes and acidic demeanor served as potent repellents, though she lived only miles from my house. My sister’s latest phone calls had gone unanswered and I’d rationalized missed birthday presents to her four children in terms of my busy, busy schedule and flimsy, floppy budget.

Accepting Gabi’s invitation would assuage my shame at being such a lousy daughter, sister and aunt. Plus, I liked Gabi. Of all of my nieces, she showed the most gumption and independent spirit. Want to know my favorite story about her? At seven, she’d blown up her oldest sister’s birthday cake with a junior chemistry set she’d gotten for Chanukah. Eva, *my* sister, screamed; I couldn’t stop laughing when she told me.

“Sasha? Are you still there?” Darnda’s voice glided on Indian flute music, but the calming strains only served to jar my sleep-deprived nerves.

“Yes, but I don’t want to be.”

“Promise you’ll call later this morning.”

“Right,” I said, already flirting with the next dream cycle. An image of Jim, the chipmunk-faced boy who took me to the prom, squiggled through my REM stage. The class bell rang in the middle of the dance. He tried to kiss me and Why did the bell keep ringing?

I emerged from the dream and answered the phone, all of my irritation sluicing out in a single word. “What?”

“Ms. Solomon?” The man’s New Mexican accent had been suckled on the smooth undulations of Spanish before cutting its teeth on the rough edges of English.

“Yes?” Monosyllabic responses prevented longer rants and wasted energy.

“This is Detective Sanchez from the Socorro Police Department. I’m sorry to disturb you so early.”

I turned on the light, moved out of the bed. “It’s no problem.”

Policemen never called me for fun. With dread replacing my warm blankets, I walked into the kitchen. Wafts of winter air scurried under the un-caulked wooden door and my feet protested on the freezing brick floor. I cinched the fraying belt on my ratty robe tighter and opened the fridge to inspect a half-eaten cinnamon roll. Heated, to melt the frosting, and topped with a coat of whipped cream, it might provide comfort. I had the pastry in the microwave before the person on the other end spoke again.

“Gabriela Shofet asked me to call you.”

“Gabi? What’s happened to Gabi?” I nearly stepped on Leo. He hissed and swatted at my leg. Feeling for a chair, I sat down. My finger pressed the whipped cream nozzle, dousing the roll in yards of sweetness. Leo leapt up to inspect my breakfast and stuck a paw in all that white. I batted him away. He didn’t get the message until an elbow shoved him off the table.

“There’s been an accident.”

Gabi hurt? I didn’t know she even owned a car. “Oh my God. Where is she?”

“At the hospital. They’re still checking her out, but she’s conscious now.”

He paused. I heard voices in the background but couldn’t make out the words. “Your niece asked if you could come down today. Apparently her mother is unavailable?”

“Eva’s in Europe.” Darnda had been spot-on! *Ohmigod*. “Tell me what happened.” My imagination flared with a vivid picture of my lovely niece smashed up in a twisted, bent mass of metal and glass. “Never mind. You can explain later. I’m on my way.”