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SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

PRESENT DAY

The doorbell chimed shortly after nine A.M. on a lazy, sunny Saturday morning.

Michelle Martinez was in her kitchen, emptying a dishwasher that had been stacked far beyond anything the laws of physics could explain while accompanying the rousing choral outro to the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Under the Bridge" that was belting out from the radio. She looked up, used her forearm to sweep back the chestnut-brown bangs that kept playing games with her baby blues, and gave a gentle yell in the direction of the living room.

"Tom? Can you get that, *cariño*?"

"You got it, *alteza*," came a reply from the front of the house.

Michelle grinned, threw a glance over her shoulder at her four-year-old son, Alex, who was playing out in the backyard, and got back to emptying the cutlery tray. In the background, the lead Chili was lamenting the dark days he'd spent chasing speedballs in the bowels of LA. She loved that song, with its haunting guitar intro and its epic closing chorus, despite the emotions its lyrics stirred in her. Being a retired DEA agent, it was a world of pain and devastation that she knew well. But right now, what she loved far more was when Tom called her that—*your highness*. It was so *not*

her, so wildly off the mark, and the sheer absurdity of it never failed to tickle her.

He usually said it when she asked him for something, which didn't happen that often, not even with her consciously reminding herself to do so every once in a while. The fact was, there wasn't much that Michelle Martinez couldn't, or wouldn't, do for herself. She was as self-sufficient as a military spouse, which is exactly what her mother had been, something that had probably been ingrained in her by watching her mom all those years while growing up on army bases in Puerto Rico and New Jersey. It was that self-sufficiency, combined with her iron will and her intolerance for bullshit, that had got her into all kinds of trouble—she'd been expelled from a handful of schools before dropping out of high school altogether—but it was also what had helped her straighten up, get herself a General Education Diploma, and parlay her wild streak, her sharp tongue, and a series of brushes with the law into a meteoric, if ultimately cut short, career as an undercover agent of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The thing was, guys didn't appreciate feeling like you didn't need them. At least, that's what her girlfriends kept telling her. Apparently, it was some vestige from man's hunter-gatherer days, and, truth be told, they weren't all wrong. Tom seemed to enjoy the occasional request, whether it was for something as trivial as opening the front door or for something more, shall we say, intimate. And it had generated the *alteza* nickname that she'd grown to love, one she far preferred to the various macho nicknames her fellow agents had for her back when she was on the force. *Alteza* was much smoother on the ears and had an old-world, romantic ring to it. It was a word that triggered a little grin at the edge of her mouth every time she heard him say it.

The grin didn't last long.

As the chorus gave way to the song's closing solo guitar strums, the next sound she heard wasn't as pleasing.

It wasn't Tom's voice. It was something else.

Two sharp, metallic snaps, like someone had just fired a nail gun. Only Michelle knew it wasn't a nail gun at all. She'd been around enough sound-suppressed handguns in her life to know what the automatic slide action of a real gun sounded like.

The kind that fired bullets that killed people.

Tom.

She yelled out his name as she sprang to action, propelled by instinct and training, almost without thinking, as if the threat of death had triggered some kind of Pavlovian reflex that took over her body. Her eyes quickly picked out the large kitchen knife from the mess of cutlery, and it was already firmly in her grip as she rounded the counter and hurtled toward the kitchen door.

She reached it just as a figure emerged from it, a man in white coveralls, a black cap, a black pull-up mask covering his face from the nose down and a silenced gun in his hand. The split-second glimpse she got of him shouted out some vague features—thickset, bad skin, what looked like a buzz cut—but most of all, she was struck by the unflinching commitment that emanated from his eyes. She took him by surprise as they almost collided and she leapt at him, pushing his gun hand away with her left hand while plunging the knife into the side of his neck with the other. His eyes sauced with shock, and the blade had pulled down his face mask, exposing his thick, black Fu Manchu moustache just as blood spewed out of his mouth. He dropped the gun and reached up for the knife with both hands and grappled with it, but Michelle had plunged it in deep and it was solidly embedded. She'd also clearly hit his carotid as blood was geysering out of the wound, spraying the doorjamb to his left.

She wasn't about to hang around and watch. Especially not when her gut was screaming at her that the man probably wasn't alone.

She threw a flat kick at the gurgling intruder's midsection, sending him crashing into the wall of the hallway, away from the fallen handgun, which was lying there, tantalizingly close. She bent down to grab it when another man appeared, at the other end of the hallway, similarly masked and armed. The man flinched with a stab of shock at

the sight of his bloodied buddy, then his eyes locked on Michelle's and his gun sprang up in a solid, two-fisted grip. Michelle froze, caught in the crosshairs, staring death in the eye, right there, in the hallway outside her kitchen—but death never came. The shooter held his stance for a long second, long enough for her to dive at the handgun, spin around, and loose a couple of rounds at him. Wood and plaster splintered off the walls around him as he ducked out of sight, and she heard him yell out, "She's got a gun."

There were others.

She didn't know how many, nor did she know where they were. One thing she did know: Alex was out back. And it was time to high-tail it out of there and get him to safety.

Her mind rocketed into hyperdrive, focused acutely on that single objective. She darted back and took cover behind the kitchen wall, tried to ignore the pounding in her ears, and listened to any sounds coming at her from the front of the house, then she made her move. She fired off three quick rounds down the hall to keep them guessing, then rushed across the kitchen and flew out the patio doors, running to the drumbeat of survival as fast as her legs would carry her.

Alex was there, on the grass, orchestrating yet another epic confrontation between his small army of Ben 10 figurines. Michelle didn't slow down. She just stormed over to him, tucking the gun under her waistband without breaking step, and scooped up his tiny, three-and-a-half-foot frame in her arms and kept going.

"Ben," the boy protested as a toy flew out of his tiny grasp.

"We gotta go, baby," she said, breathless, one arm clasped around his back, the other pressed down against the back of his head, holding him tight.

She sprinted across the lawn to the door that led to the garage, stopping to glance back only once she reached it, her heart jackhammering its way out of her rib cage. She saw one of them appear through the patio doors just as she flung the garage door open and ducked inside, fiddling with its key to lock it behind her.

“Mommy, what are you doing?”

His mouth was moving, but nothing was registering as her eyes surveyed in all directions, her mind totally channeled on one thought: escape. She told him, “We’re just going for a ride, okay? Just a little ride.”

She flung open the door of her Jeep, hustled Alex inside, and clambered into the driver’s seat. The Wrangler was parked with its back to the garage’s tilt-up door, which was shut.

“Down there, sweetie,” she told Alex, herding him into the passenger’s foot well with a careful mix of urgency and tenderness. “Stay there. We’re gonna play hide and seek, okay?”

He gave her a hesitant, uncertain look, then smiled.

“Okay.”

She dug deep and found him a smile as her fingers fired up the ignition. The V6 sprang to life with a throaty gurgle.

“Stay down, all right?” she told him as she threw the gear lever into reverse, floored the gas pedal, then turned to face back and yanked her foot off the clutch.

The Jeep bolted backwards and burst through the garage door, careening onto the street in a storm of rubber and twisted sheet metal. She spotted a white van parked outside the house and slammed the brakes, and just as the Jeep screeched to a halt, she saw two men, also in white coveralls, rushing out from her front door. She slammed the car into gear and roared off, keeping a nervous eye in the mirror, expecting the white van to come charging after her, but to her surprise, it didn’t. It just stayed in its spot and receded into the distance before she hung a right and turned off her street.

She snaked her way past slower cars and turned left, right, and left again at the next crossings, zigzagging away from the house, keeping one eye peeled on her rearview mirror, her mind ablaze with questions about Tom and what had happened to him. She didn’t know what state he was in, didn’t know whether he was even still alive, but she had to get help to him, fast. She reached into her back pocket, pulled out her phone, and punched in nine-one-one.

The dispatcher picked up almost instantly. “What’s your emergency?”

“I’m calling to report a shooting. Some guys showed up at our house and—” She suddenly realized Alex was in the car with her, eyeing her curiously from the foot well of the passenger seat, and paused.

“Ma’am, where are you calling from?”

“We need help, okay? Send some squad cars. And an ambulance.” She gave the dispatcher her address, then added, “You need to be quick, I think my boyfriend’s been shot.”

“What’s your name, ma’am?”

Michelle thought about whether or not to answer as she glanced at Alex, who was still staring up at her, wide-eyed. She decided there was no point in adding any more information at this point.

“Just get them there as fast as you can, all right?”

Then she hung up.

Her heart was thundering away furiously in her chest as she checked her mirror again and flew past another slow-moving car. There was still no sign of the van. After about five minutes, she started to breathe easier and helped Alex up and into the front seat, where she belted him in. It took her another half an hour of just putting miles between her and her house before she felt she could pull over, and finally did so in the parking lot of a large mall out at Lemon Grove.

She didn’t move for a while. She just sat there, in shock, picturing Tom—and started to cry. The tears smeared her cheeks, then she looked over and saw Alex staring at her, and she forced herself to stop and wiped them off.

“Come on, baby. Let’s get you back into your seat.”

She got out of the car and helped Alex into the back and onto his booster seat, belted him in, then got back in and sat there again, shivering, collecting her thoughts, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Trying to figure out what to do next. Who to call. How to deal with the insanity of what had just happened.

She looked up into the mirror and glanced at Alex. He was just

sitting there, looking tiny, staring at her with those big, vulnerable eyes of his, eyes that fear had now firmly in its grip, and as she stared at his face, one name broke through the daze and the confusion swirling around inside her head. And although it was someone she hadn't spoken to for years, right now, it seemed like the right move.

She scrolled her phone's contacts list, found his name, and, mumbling a silent prayer that his number hadn't changed, hit the Dial button.

Reilly picked up on the third ring.