

*October 13*

*Tucson, Arizona*

*3 a.m.*

Janet Mitchell grabbed her slippers from the floor beside her bed, shook them hard enough to knock any lurking scorpions free, and was halfway through the bedroom door before realizing she hadn't a clue where she was going. Worse than that—the slippers were still in her hand.

Not a good thing when you lived in the desert.

She jammed her feet into the soft leather, pausing briefly as a door slammed somewhere outside. Heat flushed her body, followed by a chill that had nothing to do with the swamp-cooled air. She glanced back at her husband. Listened to his soft snores. Maybe she should wake Bill up. Send him down to investigate. But Bill would just pat her shoulder, mumble something about worrying too much, and start snoring again.

Another slam. A car door from the sound of it.

The chill spread down her bare arms, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake. This wasn't the big city, this was Saguaro Hills, a sleepy suburban neighborhood on Tucson's southern edge, where the only things stirring from midnight to six were scorpions and coyotes.

A slamming door at three a.m. demanded attention.

There was only one person she could think of who'd be out at this time of night and that particular person should be easing doors closed, not slamming them.

Teri.

Once again Janet's feet moved before her brain kicked into gear. Her daughter had spent the day—and the evening—with her fiancé. Her bed had been empty when Janet went to sleep, but nineteen-year-old Teri—sweet as a kitten with claws and oh, so in love—was supposed to be home by midnight.

*Teri's a grown woman*, Janet reminded herself. She paused in the hallway as her eyes adjusted to the dim light from the street lamps outside.

Grown woman or not, Teri was still her baby and that little worry knot cramping Janet's stomach wouldn't go away until she'd made sure her daughter was safe.

Her slippers hissed ominously along the faux-Persian rug lining the hall floor. She didn't look at the family pictures staring from the walls, concentrating instead on the soft glow from the

bathroom nightlight spilling onto her daughter's half-open door.

A door Teri generally closed when she went to bed.

“Darn that girl.” Worry turned to frustration and back to worry again, burbling like an overdone stew. She'd been over this with her daughter time and again: call if you're going to be home after midnight. A simple phone call eliminated the nightmares that swirled through a mother's mind:

Accident.

Abduction.

Murder.

Even in this neighborhood, with its neighborhood watch and caring residents, Janet never fooled herself. Bad things happened to good people all the time. A not-so-little fact of life driven home when a neighbor's little boy was hit by a car and instantly killed.

Janet didn't realize she was holding her breath until her hand was on Teri's door. She shoved into the room, ready to deliver a motherly sermon with both barrels...

And paused at the sight of her daughter tucked peacefully into bed.

A trace of sweet cinnamon drifted into the hall. The little worry knot unraveled as Janet watched her daughter sleep. Teri's dark hair looked black in the dim light from her Pooh Bear nightlight. A few tousled curls fell onto her forehead, framing eyebrows arched upward like a blackbird's wings. Her lips parted as if about to say something smart and sassy, but all that came out was a soft snort.

Curled snugly in the hollow between Teri's knees and tummy was the reason why the door had been left open: Queenie. A slender Siamese kitten that raised holy hell if she couldn't get out of a room.

The kitten raised her head, blinking curiously at the interruption, then exploded from bed and tore out the door as a car engine roared to life nearby.

Janet's pulse quickened. Quietly, she crossed the room and peered out the window. Outside everything looked quiet, both in the side yard and the house next door. No disappearing headlights. In fact, she couldn't see the street at all. The side yard looked clear—no vandals skulking in the cactus. No thieves lugging TV sets out the door.

Janet hadn't realized until now how limited Teri's view was. She couldn't see into the back yard either.

You have to stay vigilant, whispered a little voice in her head. Keep the neighborhood and your family safe.

It would only take a second to run downstairs and check outside. That's what neighborhood watch was all about, right? Then she could climb back into bed, reclaim her covers from Bill, and go back to sleep.

Janet hurried downstairs and into the entryway. The streetlight shone brighter in here. Probably because she'd forgotten to close the curtains again.

Someone could be outside right now, the voice in her head whispered. Someone could be looking in.

A pillow tumbled off the couch.

Janet froze, heart racing, as another pillow tumbled, then another and another. Then a cream-colored blur scrambled over the back of the couch and disappeared.

The kitten. Of course. Why else would pillows mysteriously tumble off her couch?

Janet dodged the coffee table, tossed the pillows back on the couch, and looked out the front window.