



GIZMO

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MELISSA
STEVENS

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34. Author's Note

“Hey Giz, you sure we’re the only ones here?” Crash’s voice was filled with uncertainty.

“I set the cameras to motion sensor and an alert should they be triggered. If there had been anything here, even a coyote, since our last visit, the system would send me an alert.” Gizmo shifted the big box truck into park in front of the rural house his club used as a safe house. “I’ve set it up on battery backups too, so it works even if the power cuts out. It also alerts me if that happens. I need to know if I need to replace the batteries or if there’s an issue like the power going out when it shouldn’t.

“If I’d gotten either of those alerts, we wouldn’t be here now. Not like this.” He took a deep breath and fought the urge to snap at his club brother. “I would make sure we had enough back up and we’d investigate without putting people in danger, or at least not innocent people.” If he had gotten an alert, that was more than something natural, like the bobcat he’d been alerted for a few weeks ago, he

would have let their president, Tuck, know so they could put together a crew to go out and investigate, make sure nothing had been damaged. Those happened more often than the other alerts.

The engine ticked as it cooled, sounding like an old-style mechanical timer reminding Gizmo there were people waiting. Tick, tick, tick.

“Come on.” He opened the door and slid out, landing almost silently on the bare dirt of the driveway. The boots he wore weren’t the best choice for moving around silently but he’d worn worse. A lot worse. Besides, there was no one but them out here so the sound didn’t matter.

Gizmo stepped to the back of the truck and waited for Crash to join him, nodding that he was ready, before opening the padlock that had kept the back of the truck from being opened by any passerby on a whim. Not that anyone had much chance. He and Crash had only stopped once on the two-hour trip from Rio Rico to the outskirts of Marana where they were now.

The trip had taken nearly twice as long as it would have if he’d used the interstate, but he’d stuck to back roads and surface streets to avoid attracting the wrong kind of attention. The box truck had the logo of a local furniture store on the side, so it wouldn’t seem out of place, but he liked to play it safe either way. No, the store didn’t know they were using their logo, and in another week, they wouldn’t be. The logo would be peeled off and another put in its place.

Gizmo unlocked the door and swung it open, revealing the thirty people sitting or lying in the cargo space. It was tight quarters, but

for the people who had spent the last couple days, if not longer crossing the desert on foot, a couple hours of discomfort sitting in the back of a truck with water and food was nothing.

"*Ustedes vamos.*" He curved the fingers on one hand inviting them out of the back of the truck. They all watched him warily as one at a time they stood and came toward the open door. He helped the first one down and turned back for the next. The first woman stepped a few feet away and looked around but stayed silent.

By the time he helped the fourth passenger from the truck, Crash was standing at the other side of the truck helping too, as a line had formed. A couple men moved to the edge of the truck and climbed down on their own, one turning back to lift several children down.

It didn't take but a few minutes until the only things left in the back of the truck were empty water bottles and granola bar wrappers. Gizmo grabbed the strap and pulled down the rolling door to close the cargo space, putting the lock in place. If it always looked the same, there would be less interest in the truck.

"*En la casa.*" He tilted his head toward the house and headed in that direction. The crunch of footsteps let him know they were following without having to look back. Once they were all inside, he waited until Crash closed the door, signaling that they'd all made it in. "*¿Nadie habla ingles?*"

Several hands rose slowly.

"Oh, good. My Spanish is rusty at best. Who speaks the best English?"

"I do, sir." A teenage girl, maybe fifteen or sixteen stepped forward, her English was almost perfect, with only a slight accent.

“What’s your name sweetheart?”

“I’m Nadia.”

“All right, Nadia. Let me run through the rules, I’ll go slow so you can translate then we’ll let you settle in and get some rest. I know you’re all exhausted and need some sleep.”

Gizmo waited while the girl translated, watching faces as she spoke.

“First,” he said once she’d finished and turned back to him, “for now, I need you all to stay in the house. We will have men around, they’ll be in and out of the house. They’re here to make sure you’re safe and to make sure you’ve got everything you need.” Gizmo waited while Nadia translated then continued. “Second, there’s a full house of food. If you need anything, let one of the men know, we’ll pick it up next shopping trip. If it’s urgent, let us know and we’ll get it as soon as possible. Like diapers or formula.” He tilted his head to the woman on one side of the room nursing a baby that looked about six months old. “There are some basics here, but we’ll get more.” He waited while Nadia translated again. “We’ll keep you here a few days to make sure you’re all safe and healthy, then we’ll break you up in to smaller groups to move you on, get you a little farther into the country so you’ll be safe.”

What he didn’t tell them was the camera he’d aimed at the front door had caught each one’s face as they’d stepped in the door. He would be running them all through facial recognition software. He didn’t expect to get results for most of them, but once in a while one of the faces he ran would pop on some watch list. Those were part of the reason he did this.

Gizmo walked through the house, showing Nadia and anyone who had followed them where the bedrooms, kitchen, and bathrooms were, as well as where the bedding and towels were kept. There was time to show them where to do laundry later. Now they all looked like they'd been walking for days. First priorities were food and rest.

They divided themselves into the bedrooms, each furnished with several sets of bunk beds to get as many people in each room as they comfortably could. This place wasn't set up for long term living, but it didn't have to be another part of the nightmare they'd been living either.

He watched as those travelling with children got them settled first, then laid down themselves, often beside the kids. Less than an hour after pulling into the driveway, they were all in bed, and mostly sleeping. There were a few who seemed too worried they weren't as safe as they'd been told. There always were. Give them a day or two and it would be better.

Once they were all settled, Gizmo nodded to Crash who had brought a wood chair from the dining room into the living room and put it one corner. There the other man sat keeping an eye out for trouble, while Gizmo slipped out the front door, closing it softly behind him so he wouldn't disturb anyone. He waited until he was past the truck before pulling out his phone and dialing.

"We're here and settled," he told Tuck, the club president.

"Good. Any trouble?"

"None." Gizmo scanned the desert surrounding the house for activity, but the only movement was a road runner perched on top of

a barrel cactus watching for prey, it's tail bobbing up and down as it balanced in the slight breeze. He understood the feeling. "We're good till someone shows but I want to run these faces soon."

"Recognize someone?"

"There's something about one of them but I'm not sure if it's a resemblance to someone else or if he's a face I've seen before."

Tuck made a noise Gizmo interpreted as him thinking. "I'll send out someone to replace you, then you can work your magic. Shouldn't be more than an hour till you're relieved."

"Sounds good."

"Anything else that needs my attention?"

"Not really. We've got a couple of really small kids, at least one under a year, possibly two. But I really think the other is closer to two than one."

"So, we need to send Kinard out there to check them over. How do they look?"

"They're all a little thin, but the babies don't look any worse off than the rest. Nearly all the mothers are scrawnier than I'd like. As if they've been giving up food so the kids could eat."

"Not uncommon. We'll get a few good meals in them before we move them on."

"That's about how I saw it." Gizmo leaned one shoulder against the truck and stared out across the desert, noting the dust trail floating up, letting him know some vehicle was speeding along a dirt road not too far from them. He wasn't worried, that road didn't lead here.

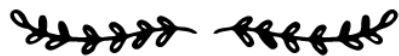
"When you get in, start your scans then come see me."

"Trouble?"

"Not yet." A soft click told him the call had been disconnected.

Gizmo shook his head and pocketed his phone. Tuck had a thing about not saying goodbye or anything else before hanging up. It was starting to spread as the last call Gizmo had had with Ruger had ended the same way.

What was it they said about people who spent too much time together? Something about their personalities start to blur together but he couldn't remember the whole thing. He shook his head and tried to figure out why the one face seemed so familiar.



"Did you figure out who he was?" Tuck asked as Gizmo pulled out a chair across from where the president already sat.

"Not yet, but I started the search." Gizmo shook his head. "I don't know what it is yet, but he's triggering something in the back of my mind. I'll figure it out, one way or another."

"I've got faith in you, but that's not why I wanted to see you." A flash of light drew Gizmo's attention to Tuck's hand. The coin the president only pulled out when he was mulling some problem flipped back and forth over the older man's knuckles without his having to look at it or watch what he was doing. "I need you to eval and update the security systems on all the club businesses."

Gizmo blinked. Possibilities flashed through his mind. "Any thing specific or a general update?"

"Nothing specific, but I want to make sure there's video everywhere, with as much detail as we can get, and sound if possible."

Gizmo nodded, trying to remember what kind of systems he'd set up where and what would need to be updated and replaced.

"Who's paying? The club or the business?"

"The business if they can afford it, but we can pull from the club if needed. When we get all the businesses done I want to look at homes. I've not yet decided how we'll finance those but decide what we need to do it all and see if we can get some kind of bulk discount. That will help everyone involved."

"All right." Gizmo fell silent, thinking. After a few minutes he looked back up at the club leader. "Want me to use official channels or not?"

Tuck shook his head. "It might be cheaper if we did, but no. I don't want any chance anything, even the smallest component, can be traced to anywhere but here or each business. We rely on each other and ourselves for a reason."

"Gotcha. Mind if I lock myself in the other room and work on this, and the other, for a while?"

Tuck agreed. They relied on themselves to avoid any clusterfucks from dealing with unreliable persons.

"Go for it. If I need you, I'll either call or knock. I don't have any reason to think we've got a breach, but I want you to keep this secure. Tell only those who need to know as we do this."

"You got it, *jefe*." Gizmo stood, pushing his chair back where he'd gotten it. He ignored Tuck's eye roll as he went to the bar and waved to Jailbait, who made her way to where Gizmo stood and passed him a cold bottle of beer. Cold one in hand, he headed for the back room. Some clubs called it Church, the Demented Souls

just called it theirs, either way, it was their private place, their sanctuary. He closed and locked the door before going to the hidden room he thought of as his inner sanctum and triggered the lock release.

All the brothers had access, they knew how to get in and how to use most of the equipment in the small bedroom sized room, but Gizmo was the only one who really loved the space, the only one who would rather be here than almost anywhere. Well, except on a bike.

He pushed the thought of a good ride from his head as he pulled up the schematics he'd used for each business when he'd installed each security system and printed them out. This wasn't going to be the fastest project he'd done, but it was right up his alley.

A glance at the monitor in the corner told him the pictures from the safe house were still running and he hadn't gotten any matches yet, so he turned back to this project, giving the other program time to do its thing.

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