

An Excerpt From:

CRESCENDO
by Deborah J Ledford

CHAPTER 4

Inola glanced up from her digital Seiko to look at the dull, gray clouds low in the sky. The early sunlight lost its battle to burn through the Great Smoky Mountain fog as she maneuvered the cruiser along the hairpin curves of the two-lane as fast as she dared.

Cody shifted in his seat and adjusted his Kevlar vest. "I'm still not used to this dang thing. Too bad we have to wear them all the time. But better safe than dead, right, partner?" He winced and tugged at the vest again. "Maybe I need to get a bigger size."

Inola's thoughts remained on Hawk's parting critical words. She glanced at her partner, then said in a stern voice, "Cody, you need to be more professional around Hawk. Don't joke about taking anyone out around him. He's never even needed to draw his firearm since he became sheriff, and only a few times as a deputy."

"How's that possible?"

"He uses words. He's real good with them."

"Words, huh? What words work on you?"

Inola's glare extinguished the grin on Cody's face. "Quit dickin' around. I mean it. In twenty-eight days you won't be a rookie anymore, you'll be out there on your own, but only if I give Chief Traeger my approval."

"I was just joshin' around with the sheriff. Hawk knows that." Cody waited a beat, and when Inola didn't reply, added, "He does know that, right?"

"Hawk's in charge of Swain County. He's the boss, no matter what Traeger thinks. Even though you and I are partners, you need to show Hawk respect. I know you're still learning the job, but that's no excuse. You need to be professional. Always. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am," he muttered. "I'm sorry. I'll do better. Professional. Tough. Steely gazed command of every incident."

"Don't get carried away and turn rogue on me."

"Naw. Just a great cop. Like you. You're my hero, you know. Best cop on the force. And I'm your partner. You're awesomeness is bound to rub off on me."

"All right, all right, quit blowing smoke up my skirt."

"Like you'd ever wear a skirt."

"True," she said. "Are you excited about the ceremony tonight?"

"You bet." His blue eyes danced. "How 'bout you?"

"Sure," Inola said with as much excitement as she could call up.

"Bet Hawk's proud as heck of you." He turned to her when she didn't answer. "He's comin', ain't he?"

She sighed. "If the day goes right he will."

"Well, you can borrow a few of my kinfolk to celebrate with if Hawk's a no-show. My folks have got people coming in from all over the state. Aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters. Cousins I haven't seen in years, even my preacher grandpa who can't hear a lick."

"Good for you, Cody. You earned it."

"Not really, but I'm takin' it. It may not be the Medal of Honor, like yours, but my Medal of Bravery

will do just fine. Sergeant Simms said the governor himself is pinning on our medals. Do you believe that?”

“If the sergeant says so, it’s probably true,” she said absently, hoping her award night would feature Hawk’s presence. She was more concerned he’d miss the ceremony than excited about having a medal pinned on her again.

Cody straightened in the seat and gazed out the window, most likely already fantasizing about the accolades they would receive later that night. Inola’s thoughts turned to the circumstance that had drawn so much attention to them. The armed robber who attempted to holdup a convenience store Inola and Cody had faced two weeks earlier still haunted her dreams every other night. No one had a clue how the ex-con, wanted in three states, had wound up in Bryson City, North Carolina.

Inola replayed the events of that day when the call had come over their cruiser radio. They were only a block away from the attempted robbery alert and when they arrived at the convenience store parking lot nothing looked to be out of the ordinary. Inola parked out of view from the entrance, then she and Cody eased to the double doors. Cody held up his index finger and thumb to Inola, verifying a gunman.

She patted the air with her open hand, spun an index finger, then flashed him two fingers and an open zero—their silent language for: Stay put. She would go around back. Give her to the count of twenty before entering.

Cody drew his Glock from its holster and bent his knees, looking ready to ignore her order and bolt inside. She thinned her eyes and lips in a warning glare. The look needed no translation. Cody nodded his agreement.

Inola sprinted around the building and stopped at the edge of the structure. She unsnapped the trigger guard, pulled her weapon, stuck her head out only long enough to assess any danger in the alley. Two men stood at the open door of the store, peering in.

She ducked back, took in a breath, peered down her Glock’s sights, whirled around the corner and strode toward the men. Before she had a chance to announce they turned to her and reached for the sky, their red vests trembling. Inola recognized them from her mid-morning coffee runs and she hitched her head for the employees to beat it, then she crept through the back door.

Shouts, screams and sobbing rang in her ears. Confusion ruled the scene. Recognizing Cody’s voice, she clenched her teeth to halt the curses she wanted to hurl at her cowboy partner.

“Go, go, go,” Cody commanded.

Four terrorized customers scrambled out the door.

“Okay, it’s just us now,” Cody told the gunman.

Inola looked over a row of canned goods to see Cody and the gunman standing twelve paces from each other in front of the counter, guns pointed. She couldn’t make out features of the robber’s face, covered with a bush of a black beard, greasy bangs hanging to his eyes, but she knew he held a .45 caliber revolver. Three shots had already been reported by dispatch, so three rounds still remained. Enough to kill them both.

“This is over,” Cody said. “Put down the gun.”

“Kiss my ass,” the gun-wielding man growled, moving forward, matching Cody’s retreating steps.

Inola crossed the store and rushed forward. The robber fired a shot as Inola dove, hitting the side of Cody’s body. The bullet whizzed past Inola’s ear. She tucked, dropped, rolled on the linoleum. Cody dropped to the floor, his Glock flinging from his grasp to slide mere inches from the gunman. Inola popped to her feet, aimed, fired a round into the robber’s thigh.

As if reading Inola’s mind, Cody said, “I still can’t believe how you took that perp down. One shot. *Pop*. Right through the leg.”

“Chief Traeger is still pissed about that one. ‘Shoulda’ gone for the body shot Waaalellaa. Damned lucky you and Cody weren’t both kilt dead.”

Cody chuckled at Inola’s perfect mimic of their abrasive commander. “Traeger knows you’re the best shot in the county. Shoot, you’re the all-time marksmanship champ. You knew exactly what you were doing.”

“There’s no way I was going to kill a guy for stealing fifty-two dollars and a case of beer,” Inola

muttered.

“Would you have kilt him dead if you knew he’d murdered that clerk in Tennessee?”

Inola didn’t know how to respond to the question. She tried never to think about what *could* have happened.

“You saved my life for sure that day, Inola.”

“Well, you saved four customers, so let’s call it even. Deal?”

Cody smiled, lighting up his golden complexion. “Deal.” They bumped fists together to seal the agreement. “Speaking of Chief Traeger, I ran into his niece when she went on shift last night.”

Inola gripped the steering wheel tighter. “Oh, yeah? What’s she like?”

A grin spread across Cody’s face. “She’s a looker. Really fills out her uniform. I’ll bet she gets pretty near anything she wants, just by batting her big blue eyes.”

From a case on her utility belt, she pulled out a pack of spearmint gum she always carried and popped a stick into her mouth. “Good to know she’s qualified—for something.”

“You’re not worried about a little competition are you?”

“Look, Cody, you know Traeger will only keep one woman on his force. I was the first female he took a chance on. He’s regretted it ever since.”

“I don’t know why you say that. You’re the most decorated cop on his force. Just because they’re related doesn’t mean Lori’s a better candidate for the job. Anyway, I wouldn’t worry about it...unless he appoints her to the day-shift.” He gave her a playful grin.

“You’re such a comfort to me, partner.” She wriggled in her seat and a sear of pain sliced across her knee. Biting back a groan, she rubbed her leg.

“What’s up with your knee?”

“Snow’s on the way,” she said, diverting the subject, figuring Cody would want to know every detail about her re-inflamed injury. He still felt guilty about her accident and she didn’t want to hear yet another apology from him.

Cody had put it upon himself to show up at every one of the physical therapy sessions after her surgery, each time prodding her to do five more leg lifts, five more pounds on the step machine, five more laps in the pool, pissing her off, making her grow strong and surpassing what she thought capable. It was as much due to his efforts as hers that she was now back to peak performance and rarely suffered any pain...until this morning.

Cody turned back to jotting notes. “Too early in the year for snow, isn’t it?”

“Bet you tequila shots we see flakes within the hour.” A smile played on her lips. She usually won her wagers with Cody, who tended to underestimate her ability to pull off a surprise victory.

Cody craned his neck, looking out the windshield at the clouds that had grown darker since they’d pulled onto the highway. “If you say so. I’ll alert Channel Six. Tequila for me, juice for you, right? You gotta be good, Inola.”

After she turned the cruiser from the mountain road to the I-74 expressway that led to the Bryson City turnoff, she glanced at him, thinking at first he was mocking her. His caring expression told her otherwise.

He pushed up the cuff of his sharply pressed uniform shirt and looked at his watch. “We’re gonna be late for roll call. I don’t want to miss anything.”

Inola accelerated and the powerful cruiser rocketed up the highway. She wove around speeders who automatically slowed when they spotted the marked police cruiser.

Cody reached for the dashboard. “Jeez, Inola. Be careful or Hawk’s deputies will nab us for speeding. Is it worth riding a desk for a week?”

“You said you don’t want to be late. Simms will bust us down to parking ticket duty if we come straggling in again.”

“Yeah, but the sergeant will have our asses if we wind up in Sally Talcott’s morgue. I think we’d better slow down.”

Inola let up on the gas pedal, thinking maybe her partner had been paying attention after all. She checked her side view mirror. A car sped closer, veering from one lane to another. “Heads up. Some

fool's coming up on us pretty fast.”

Cody looked over his shoulder, then pulled the computer closer to click a few keystrokes. “What've you got?”

“White sedan weaving in and out. He's going to pass us any second.”

As the car raced by, the driver, a hulking red-bearded man wearing a Hawaiian shirt, looked back and forth from his rearview to side mirror, never giving the patrol car a glance. A woman sitting in the back seat gestured wildly to him.

Inola trouble sensed trouble. She flipped on the cruiser's lights and siren and accelerated.

“Vehicle has a broken taillight. Did you get a read on the plate?” Cody asked, typing away.

She focused on the rear of the vehicle, now several car lengths ahead. “No plates. Not even a temporary sticker.”

“That's not good,” Cody said, his voice rising with excitement.

Blood rushed to Inola's ears, her pulse quickened. She tugged at the seatbelt that mashed against her chest, her breathing becoming more and more rapid. Dodging cars and trucks along the expressway's three lanes, she maneuvered the cruiser close enough to see the woman passenger's arms flail as she slapped the driver's shoulder again and again.

“Something's definitely going on up there.” Her heart beat faster, knowing what awaited them would be more than an average traffic stop.

Hearing the siren, drivers slowed their vehicles while some straddled the expressway's shoulder lines, allowing the cruiser to move without obstruction toward the fleeing sedan. Approaching the Bryson City exit, the chase ended as quickly as it had begun. The driver unexpectedly gave up the chase and pulled into the triangular painted area that marked the entrance to the highway's off-ramp.

“Hells bells and puppy dog tails,” Cody said, reaching for the microphone unit hanging from the dash-mounted radio. “I hate it when they stop in the gore. Why didn't he just get off at the exit?”

Inola rolled to a stop a few lengths behind the sedan. “Nothing's right about this.” She checked her mirrors, then focused on the hysterical woman in the car ahead of them.

Cody switched the radio microphone to the loudspeaker position and ordered, “Drive ahead to the shoulder.” His amplified voice bounced off the hard surfaces of asphalt and the cement shoulder of the road.

Inola silenced the siren and eyed the rushing traffic, mere feet from her door. The quarrel continued ahead, both cars idling.

“Drive forward!” Cody said again into the microphone.

The driver flicked his arm back, striking the woman in the face. She stopped for a moment, hand to her cheek, then she continued slapping at the driver.

Inola gasped. Her skin tingled and it was all she could do not to rush from the cruiser and yank the driver from behind the steering wheel. Instead, she pressed the call button on the hand-held unit clipped to the shoulder of her uniform. “Dispatch, this is five-one-eleven. Assault in progress, I-seventy-four and the BC exit. White sedan, no plates, no tags.”

“I'm gonna tear his head off,” Cody hissed, bolting from the idling cruiser.

“Wait for me.” She reached for his sleeve, but not fast enough to subdue her partner, who jumped out of the cruiser and stalked toward the sedan.

“Dammit!” Inola ripped her seatbelt loose. Crisp air stung her cheeks and whipped her ponytail. Hand at the ready to pull her Glock, she followed after Cody as cars slowed to rubberneck, causing an even more dangerous situation. Other vehicles whizzed past.

Hand on the butt of his holstered pistol, Cody charged to the driver's side of the vehicle. Inola approached the car and stopped in front of the passenger's door.

“Identification. Now,” Cody growled at the driver's window, rolled down a few inches. “Keep one hand on the wheel, and reach real easy for your wallet.”

The passenger sat still at the edge of the backseat, her head leaning against the driver's headrest. Inola rapped on the window but the woman didn't move.

The driver tightened his lips, jaw muscles bulging, squinted eyes faced forward. White knuckles

dotted with freckles clutched the steering wheel. “Kiss my ass,” he hissed.

They were the same words issued in the same belligerent manner as the robber from the convenience store. Inola winced. Cody cocked his head and growled, “What did you say?”

“Easy,” Inola told her partner in a soothing voice.

Cody looked at Inola for an instant then pulled his Glock from its holster. He flung the door open, pointed his gun at the driver and commanded, “Out of the car, dickhead.”

The driver spewed a menacing laugh. He sneered before sliding his bulk out of the vehicle, then laced his hands behind his head.

“You seem to know the procedure,” Cody said. “How many times have you seen a jail cell, asshole?”

“Cool it, Officer Sheehan,” Inola snapped, taken aback by her partner’s atypical curses. “Take him to the cruiser and search him.”

“You heard my partner.” Firearm trained on the driver, Cody took a step backward. “Move it. Nice and easy.”

The scowl set on Cody’s face alarmed Inola. “You sure you’ve got him?”

Cody’s eyes never left the driver. “I’m good,” the rookie said in a voice too shaky to inspire confidence. She kept an eye on Cody who followed the driver to the patrol car where he then instructed him to spread his legs and lean against the squad car’s hood.

Inola turned back to the woman passenger. She remained on the edge of the back seat, arm crooked on the driver’s seat. Tears coursed down the cheek Inola could see. Inola had witnessed the demeanor of a battered woman on many occasions, but she got the feeling this instance was different. The victim seemed lost in something so deep she didn’t even realize her threat had been removed.

“Ma’am, step out of the vehicle.” When she didn’t comply, Inola eased the door open and heard mumbled words.

Cheeks flushed, blonde hair disheveled, the woman slurred, “I got you the money. Where is my son?” Her body went limp and her forehead dropped to her forearm.

“Ma’am, please, I need you to step out of the vehicle.”

The woman turned to Inola. Eyes crazy wide, she blinked several times. Relief smoothed the tightness in her face as she seemed to see Inola for the first time. “Officer, thank God.” She slid out of the car, her flower-pattern dress billowing in the breeze. Unsteady on her feet, she swayed, a small duffel slung over her shoulder seemed to knock her off balance and she grabbed hold of the car’s doorframe.

Unsure of what could be hidden in the bag, Inola withdrew the Glock from her holster and lowered it to her side. Her attention darted from the woman to the traffic that rushed past, back to the woman again. Sweat trickled below a strap of her vest. Something definitely wasn’t right about the woman. She took a step closer but didn’t smell liquor or marijuana. “Ma’am, stay where you are and give me your identification.”

“He took it.” The woman pointed to the driver, taking a step forward.

“Stay where you are!” Inola gripped her gun with both hands, arms triangled in front of her, ready to extend her aim. “I need you to tell me what’s going on.”

Inola chanced a glance at Cody. With one hand, her partner patted down the driver’s legs and then pinned his arms to the hood of the cruiser.

“Are you working for Preston?” the woman, suddenly full of life, yelled at the driver. “Do you have any idea what he’ll do to me?” She squinted and rubbed her temples, then shook her head as if she couldn’t focus. “You can have the money. Just don’t tell him you found me.” She tossed the duffel bag on top of the white car’s closed trunk, tugged open the zipper, plunged a hand inside.

Inola raised her gun and trained it on the woman’s center mass, her finger going to the trigger.

“Twenty-five thousand dollars. It’s all I have.” Loose bills fluttered into the air. “Where is my son?” the woman shouted.

“Ma’am, calm down and talk to me.”

Slowly, the woman turned a blank stare to Inola and pleaded, “Please, help me.”

Inola’s heart beat faster as she looked into the woman’s startlingly blue, glazed, dilated eyes. Inola glanced at the driver a moment. She took a step and holstered her sidearm. The cop in her knew she

shouldn't, but nothing else had worked. "Tell me about your son," she said in a tranquil voice. "I'll issue an Amber Alert. How old is he?"

The woman's eyelids fluttered as she held her stomach with the hand clutching crumpled bills.

Inola was unsure if the woman was going to be sick, or pass out before information about the missing child could be conveyed to dispatch. "Ma'am, please let me help you."

A sob escaped from the woman's trembling lips. "Find him...before Preston..." She wobbled, raised an open palm to her temple.

Inola turned to Cody who struggled to clasp a handcuff to the perp's wrist. She tore her attention back to the woman. "Ma'am, what is your son's name?"

"I...I..." She took a few tentative steps and nearly lost her balance, crushing the unzipped bag to her side.

Inola gritted her teeth, annoyed she couldn't get through to the woman. Hawk came to her mind. What would he say to calm her? "We're going to figure this out, ma'am. But first, I need you to step to me."

The woman ignored Inola. An exhausted sob creaked out. The bag tipped and one hundred dollar bills spilled from the duffel. "Baby, I'm sorry." She opened her hand and money spiraled into the air.

Inola turned to the squad car again. The driver and Cody exchanged heated words Inola couldn't make out. She wrenched her attention back to the woman. "Ma'am, could you get back in the vehicle?"

The woman didn't move. Inola spun around to shouts that began to play out near the cruiser. Inola looked back at the woman. She had strayed a good ten feet away and stumbled closer to the white line dividing the gore point from the highway.

Inola reached out, ran toward the woman. "No!"

Cars honked, tires squealed, the smell of burning rubber stung Inola's nostrils.

A car headed right for the woman. She stood there, wide-eyed, as if stunned in place, staring at an oncoming vehicle.

Unable to reach the woman in time, Inola dove back to safety. The bumper of the racing vehicle grazed her boot's heel as she hit the road.

She heard a sickening thump as she rolled to deflect the contact, stopping in time to catch sight of the woman who somersaulted onto the vehicle's windshield, vaulted along the car's hood, tumbled off the side, thudded to the asphalt.

Breath catching in her throat, Inola rose to her knees. She winced as more tires screeched. Metal scraping metal added to the cacophony of noise and confusion. "Jesus," she muttered, taking in the scene: the woman face down on the highway, arms and legs splayed, blonde hair covering her face.

"Inola!" Cody screamed.

She whirled to see her partner struggling with the driver. One handcuff was secured to the offender's wrist, but the other swayed loose. The two men battled for Cody's weapon.

A single gunshot split the air.

Inola jumped to her feet, drew her pistol, took a Weaver's stance and fired. The driver's mouth opened and closed as he uttered a deep guttural moan.

Inola ran, feeling as though she glided above the roadway. She kept her Glock trained on the driver. He shuddered. Gasp. His body went limp and dropped to a sitting position against the cruiser's bumper. She kicked Cody's gun from the driver's hand and holstered her weapon.

Hand to his neck, Cody grinned shakily and croaked, "Nice shot, partner." A trail of blood fell downward. Crimson puddled on the white line of the road. Cody emitted an odd gurgle and slid down the cruiser's grille to plop beside the driver.

It took a moment for Inola to realize the blood wasn't coming from the prisoner. Thick claret seeped through Cody's fingers, staining the neck of his uniform and T-shirt, dropping to his hands in his lap.

Fingers shaking, Inola fumbled for the mic on her shoulder. "Officer down! Officer down! This is unit five-one-eleven. Three down. I need three busses." She strangled a sob. Fury and terror took over all capacity of reasoning. "My partner's been shot! Officer eleven-seven-four is down. Please...please help me!"

She dropped to her knees and reached out to stanch the flow streaming from Cody's neck. "Hold on,

partner. Medics are on the way.”

“Gave...up,” Cody stuttered. His eyes locked on Inola’s and then he lowered his head.

She followed his gaze to something clenched in his hand. Cody waved a credit card-sized piece of plastic between his fingers.

“Gave...up...”

Inola’s stomach lurched as she took the slick, sticky card. Cody coughed and frothy blood bubbled from his lips. She gathered her partner in her arms and rocked him. “No, Cody. Dammit, don’t give up. Please! Please. Don’t give up.”

Hot wetness soaked the front of her uniform. She clamped a hand over his pulsating wound. His blood oozed between her fingers. Praying for the ambulance and backup to arrive, she glanced around. Her body convulsed as she took in the accident scene that resembled a disaster movie more than a real-life scenario. Cars were parked in a line along the exit ramp to her right. Gridlocked vehicles clogged each lane of traffic, stunned citizens stood a safe distance away. The ashen atmosphere muted every color as fat snowflakes fluttered from the sky.

The sound of footfalls alerted her that danger still loomed. She eased Cody to the ground, slid her Glock from its holster, pivoted toward shuffling steps.

A man approached, a woman’s limp body draped in his arms, blonde hair streaming downward, the hem of her flowered dress skimming the pavement.

Inola assessed the situation—Cody, the lifeless driver, the woman, the stranger. She was about to yell out to put the woman down. Didn’t he realize he had just tainted the scene by moving her? But the look of horror on his face stopped her protest.

“I didn’t mean to hit her.” He lowered to his knees and laid the woman at Inola’s feet. “Please, can you help her? I think she’s dying.”

Inola eased her hand out and carefully swept aside the veil of hair. Her stomach lurched at the sight of the right side of the victim’s head, flatter than it should be. She placed a shaking hand to the white as porcelain neck. No beat pulsated under her fingertips. “I’m sorry,” she told the man.

His shoulders slumped as he mumbled a few words Inola could not decipher.

She wrenched away and hurried back to Cody, pulled him to her lap and resumed clutching his neck. Although the blood had slowed, it continued a thick path and she worried he would bleed out right there in her arms.

“Cody, open your eyes, partner. I need you to stay awake until the medics get here.”

He didn’t stir. Sirens wailed, growing louder with each beat of Inola’s racing heart. Feeling every bystander’s eyes on her, she settled her gaze on the only person who could possibly understand the magnitude of what had occurred—who, too, would suffer the consequences of this unforeseen catastrophe—the man who had also killed someone that day.

† † †

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