

VICE SAMPLE

AN ACTION FICTION NOVELLA

A. J. LAPE

OPERATION ELECTRON GRENADE

CONFIDENTIAL CASE NUMBER 5820-236.1:
DETECTIVE RUBY RIVERA AS CRUSH

Crush took a long drag on her Marlboro 100 and posed at the corner of Marathon and Western, waiting for johns with cash to burn. Thursday was her busiest night. Some came to her after a round of liquid courage while the married types took one last opportunity for some me-time before they gave their weekends to their families. With an exaggerated sway, she strutted to where she was right underneath a street sign demanding no right turns from midnight to seven o'clock in the morning. She snorted, tossing her cig on the sidewalk and stubbing it out. That sign had been erected to discourage workers like Crush. Why the sign? Men would buy a service and then turn right for the suburbs where the quickie was performed. As a result, right before midnight, workers like Crush knew to scam.

The wind whipped through her hair, causing the extensions to brush against her face like a warm kiss. She stood next to Georgie and Cameo. She'd gotten to know them in the past five months since she'd been working the corner. Georgie was a Goth with bottled black hair and navy undertones. It was cut into a bob with bangs perfectly straight, hitting right above her eyebrows. Hard black eyeliner circled her eyes and ditto on

having nails painted black. Her jewelry was all stainless-steel studs except for a half-moon gold necklace she'd received at her high school graduation.

Georgie was only nineteen and as bitter as a shot of apple cider vinegar. Too many plans that didn't work out tended to do that to a person.

A man revved his engine and rolled down his window, but the moment Georgie said, "Hey, sailor," he drove off. Georgie flipped off his taillights. "Virgin," she muttered. "You can always tell when it's someone's first time."

It was probably for the best. Georgie did things that turned Crush's stomach, and the sickos loved her.

Cameo gazed up at the big Hollywood sign. "I'm saving cash to enroll in USC's film school. Did I tell you?"

Blond, blue-eyed, and thin to the point of anorexia, Cameo never made it past her first commercial. Too embarrassed to go back to 'Bama, she dressed like a cheerleader and turned tricks at night. Crush doubted she would make it. She'd seen track marks on her arms last week.

Seraphina had stationed herself about twenty feet away by a bench. She was new to the corner. A short brunette with curly hair, she mostly wore red miniskirts and had curves that were pinup league. Crush watched her with the eyes of a hawk. She'd cozied up to Georgie and Cameo the very first night and took them out for drinks afterward. No one worked the corner to find a best friend, and as coincidences went, Cameo's track marks made their first appearance after she started hanging with Seraphina.

"Hey, Seraphina," Crush said. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

Seraphina smiled, displaying a row of white teeth that reminded her of a rabid, biting canine. "Perhaps at Target? 7-Eleven? Maybe I stole your parking space?" she said in a fake sweetness.

“If you’d stolen my parking space, I probably would’ve shot you, so that’s not it.”

Seraphina laughed...but Crush was serious.

If anything, Crush longed to shoot her just for that atrocious rosy perfume she wore. Crush could smell it before Seraphina even arrived.

Right about then, a gray Mazda idled at the curb.

The driver was Leif Farmer. Tall and blond, Farmer worked at a company in Silicon Valley. He’d met Cameo right before her one and only audition, and they’d stayed in touch. According to Cameo, Leif legitimately cared for her. Crush didn’t know what to make of it. On one hand, he could be a good guy. On the other, it could be his shtick to lure her into a false sense of security only to really hurt her—pick your brand of abuse. Crush had seen it all.

After Cameo got into Leif’s car and Georgie snagged a separate john, Crush rearranged her spine into a show of arrogance. When Seraphina strode toward her, Crush elbowed her out of the way, taking front and center. Crush wanted to put Seraphina in her place and knew men preferred her over the redhead—starting with her long, shapely legs. Where the other girls wore miniskirts and eff-me pumps, Crush sometimes dressed in leather pants that were painted on and a matching jacket. Crush had a mystery and carried herself with just enough class that it made men think they weren’t slumming when they paid for sexual favors. That was important for some men—especially the one-percenters Crush was after. Men at the top of the socioeconomic food chain loved to fool themselves, and they loved keeping their dirty, little secrets...secret.

A late model Mercedes had circled the block three times. Crush felt it in her bones the john wanted to roll down the window and chat, but he kept losing the nerve. Still, Crush stood at attention—available but not available. Interested but not interested. It reminded her of growing up in foster care and

hoping the family taking care of her decided she was good enough to officially adopt. She had never gotten her happy ending, and she'd learned to guard her heart and predict the heartbreak.

At age eighteen, she'd left the system altogether and began calling her own shots.

She worked retail for a while, did the fast food thing, but none of those jobs paid enough for her to live in a decent home, even when sharing expenses with someone else. And it wasn't just expenses that chafed her. She hated having to answer to someone else. At the end of the day, Crush hated authority of any kind and wanted to be her own boss—even with her johns. They told her what they wanted, and she talked them into something else. Sometimes the men drove on, but to those who didn't, Crush knew they longed to dominate her...even if only in their heads.

A white Chevy idled in front of her. It was dumb for a john to drive a white car, which told Crush he was an amateur at the game. His window went down in a descent slower than the gait of a tortoise, revealing an overly thin man with a large nose and wire circular glasses. Yup, newbie. And Crush thought picking her up was the only way he would ever have sex with anyone.

Not that she cared. If he paid, she would deliver.

Crush lifted her chin and took two slow steps forward, placing her left hand on the door. She arched her spine, making sure he caught a site of her breasts—showing him a little bit of what he could expect. She saw him swallow. “Hey, baby,” she said, making her voice lower.

“You want to party?” he asked.

Okay, a realllllll newbie. Vets got straight to the point. “What do you want?” Crush asked because she had a different price for everything and always got the money first.

Insert more of that throat-swallowing thing. He gripped the steering wheel so tight his knuckles went white. When Crush

followed his hands, she spotted a gold wedding band on his left hand. *Damn. The poor wife*, she thought.

From the corner of her eye, she spied a familiar taupe-colored Kia Rio three cars back. She exhaled—Taser.

Crush gazed at Do-You-Want-to-Party and stepped back. “Go home to your wife,” she ordered icily.

The john’s eyes bugged out of his head, and he hit the accelerator—a sudden burst of conscience or he’d lost his nerve.

Taser rolled up and hit the down button on his window. “Hey, girl, you’re lookin’ good.”

Taser had dirty-blond hair with acne scars on his face as large as the craters on the moon. Like an all-night drive-thru, Crush didn’t have time for small talk. “Cut to the chase, Taser.”

He cast a glance up into his rearview mirror. “Ford’s behind me, all right? And girl, you’re on his radar.”

Taser told her the man she’d been trolling for was at a stoplight, two cars behind. Crush stiffened her spine, alerting the john she was the one he wanted. Chauncey Ford was his name, and he was a high-class pimp. Where Crush and the others could sometimes entertain men in the double digits, with Ford it could be two to three, dependent on how long the clients paid for. Ford had a reputation of giving his girls a little test drive, though, before he set them loose on his payroll—both with his fists and carnally. A true letch.

Sure enough, when the light turned green, the black sedan idled beside Taser’s Kia. Even though she couldn’t see into the heavily tinted windows, she made sure to gaze inside with a slow, flirtatious grin. After a three-second stall, he hit the gas and drove off.

She sighed. It was a crapshoot whether he would return.

Taser popped open the passenger side door. Sliding into the seat, Crush closed herself inside, a feeling of defeat seeping into her bones.

“I’m sorry, Crush,” Taser said, sounding desperate. “He’s been asking about you. I don’t know why he didn’t stop.”

Desperation was always tinted with truth or lies. She didn’t know the genesis of Taser’s desperation, but she would find out.

Crush told Taser to circle around the block. “Are you hungry?” she asked. He nodded. “Drop me at my hog. Meet me at Mel’s in thirty.”

CHAPTER 1

RIVERA (AKA CRUSH)

Ruby Rivera popped the kickstand on her Harley-Davidson Sportster and swung her leg over the top. Her feet crunched on the gravel as she stood outside Mel's Drive-In in WeHo. She'd changed out of her spiky sandals and into boots she kept in the storage trunk behind her seat. The boots were more her, but the cover called for heels. An LAPD vice detective for the past three years, she was living four lives at the moment—changing covers for each assignment. Vice was an interesting field. The bulk of it, in short, revolved around people indulging in the “id” part of their personalities—their deepest darkest desires took the driver's seat and they omitted their responsibilities, taking the easy way out instead of having a legitimate, honorable job.

They wanted money? They stole it or exploited someone else to acquire it.

Intimacy? They paid for it instead of investing in someone and forming a lasting relationship.

A knack for sales? They sold drugs or guns. Basically, they engaged in some crimes, so they could sit on their asses and collect cash, tax-free.

Removing her helmet, she straightened the tiny silver cross

around her neck and fluffed her long, naturally brunette hair that had purple and orange extensions weaved throughout. It fit her current cover as Crush who'd grown up in foster care and as a result was mentally and emotionally unavailable. Crush had semi-permanent tattoos on the right side of her face. On her right cheek was a fat snake, surrounded by some paisley filigrees in pinks, purples, and yellows. Her right eye had a light blue contact, and her left had a yellow. Rivera was five foot five, and the last time she weighed herself the scale tipped at one hundred and twenty pounds.

In all her covers, Crush was closest to whom Rivera had been as a teenager. The cocky confidence had been nice to resurrect. Rivera had to watch herself, though, that she wasn't Crush all the time.

While she morphed back into Crush—having a no-nonsense swagger with lots of hip action—she smoothed down her leather jacket and pants while looking for her confidential informant.

Taser, real name Tim Shively, was trading information on Chauncey Ford, so he could escape jail time for assault. Taser could be a little piece of shit and had a rap sheet longer than a graduation ceremony. Thing was, put a burger and a long neck in him, and he got mouthier than a whiny Cubs fan. Along with paying for the average hand job, he'd caused a four-car pile-up while he was lighting his doobie. One of the cars was a black and white owned by the Los Angeles Police Department. Higher than a kite, Taser blamed the officer and threw a punch at him. Taser weighed a buck forty on a bloated day, but that fiasco proved even a little guy had a couple of good shots in him when he broke the officer's nose. Taser served a night in jail but got out because he squealed on Ford. Taser swore Ford ran a high-end prostitution ring with workers he'd recruited off Marathon and Western and sometimes Sunset. Taser scouted out talent, so to speak. With that grand reveal, Taser met with a

representative from the D.A.'s office and immunity was granted.

How had Ford landed at the top of the D.A.'s list? Eleven months earlier, a young woman had been dumped off the Strip. She was zip-tied and sexually assaulted. No name. No identifiable fingerprints because they'd been burned off. Just everyone's daughter or friend. The press had dubbed her Little Boo because she'd been wearing a white shirt with a black ghost on it. Little Boo's face was plastered all over eternity until someone came forward anonymously and said she'd been working for Chauncey Ford. Chauncey Ford had no known address in Los Angeles, which meant his real name was something else. Young girls sold their bodies all the time, but Little Boo's death made such an impression because she was barely five feet tall. Not big enough or old enough to fight off anyone. The coroner had estimated her to be aged somewhere between twelve and sixteen years old. She'd been branded, like someone had owned her. And she wore a diamond bracelet that was estimated to be at least five figures.

The story of Little Boo along with Taser's information galvanized the department into action. Operation Electron Grenade was formed, and Rivera and her Crush cover entered the equation. The mission objective was clear: find Chauncey Ford and shut him down permanently.

Rivera's home base was the West LA Division, but this job had her on loan to Wilshire because of her experience in sex trafficking. In fact, she was so believable, Taser thought she was Crush all the time—just another sex worker interested in the better life Ford had to offer.

Rivera glanced at her watch. She'd just been with Taser thirty minutes earlier. He was late, and Taser was never late when she promised him a burger. She didn't like the sick feeling that his tardiness gave her either.

She removed a burner from her jacket pocket, dialing him.

She never carried her real phone while on the job because she didn't want to chance anyone finding out about her personal life. Rivera was a control freak, and as a result, her covers had different phone numbers and cell phones to protect one identity from the other.

"Taser," she said when she got his voicemail, "it's Crush. Call me, asshole. It's a little past eleven thirty, and I'm at Mel's on Sunset. Waiting. You know, like I said I would, and you're not here...like you said you would be. Show up, and I'll buy you dinner if I'm not pissed. And if you bring me what I asked for, then I might throw in dessert. Again, if I'm not pissed."

She'd asked for a location on Ford and his driver, Karlin Skoll—Skoll liked to beat the prostitutes while they serviced him.

So far, Taser hadn't delivered on either request.

At first, Crush posed as a prostitute on the Sunset Strip. She'd recently moved her business to Marathon and Western at Taser's suggestion since Ford liked to troll there. She trusted Taser...sort of...but never enough to blow her cover. She'd been coached to never give the one thing your mark could hold over your head. As a result, Rivera wasn't listed anywhere on the Internet. Besides, next week she would go short or blond. Maybe tattoo the other side of her face. And she would change her name...again.

Deciding to wait for Taser in the parking lot, she thought about the long road she'd taken to get to a job in vice.

Up until seven years ago, she didn't have many scruples at all when working for the Black Stone Riders, a Las Vegas motorcycle club. Rivera had been their errand girl, mostly acting as a truck driver, moving illegal arms since she was sixteen years old—thirteen if you wanted to count the years she'd driven illegally. Rivera had never set out to be a criminal, but she'd longed for a family. Unfortunately, one minute the brothers acted as if she was blood, and the next, they reminded

her she was female and would never be fully patched in. As a result, her longstanding role within the club would have been as someone's *old lady* or *sweetie*. Rivera would never be someone's old lady or sweetie, so when her rose-colored glasses lost their shimmer, she chose to work for them on a contract basis. Although running guns at first frightened her, it meant she wouldn't have to steal food for her and her little brother, Marco, when their dad lost one too many card games. She wasn't sure what killed her father first—his broken heart or the booze. All she knew was when her mom ran off with the MC president, Rivera and her little brother, eleven years old at the time, were stuck with the man DNA said was their father, eating dog food when he was too drunk to provide a normal meal.

Being associated with BSR had merely been a means to an end. The gig paid well, and Rivera was ass-deep in debt. A chance meeting with Lincoln Taylor, a decorated vice detective and now captain within the LAPD, changed her life. He'd marched into BSR's headquarters to save a friend the club had kidnapped. That friend had highjacked a shipment of guns. Taylor had bigger cojones than anyone she'd ever met. In an op that involved the FBI, he'd not only freed his friend, but he'd noticed someone as unimportant as Rivera in the process. Whatever he'd seen, he'd given her enough confidence to leave gun-running behind. Under his guidance, she and her little brother left Vegas, and she entered the academy.

And had found a pride she'd never imagined.

It was a balmy seventy degrees at the first of December, and Rivera wanted to peel her leathers off and streak. After fifteen minutes of waiting for Taser, she glanced at the front door of Mel's and decided to eat without him. Bright ambient lights showed from the outside, making the place seem like one big party once you strolled through the doors. Celebrity sightings were normal at Mel's, and the place was loved by locals and tourists alike. Rivera chose Mel's to meet Taser because she

knew he'd never been in a place like Mel's even though he'd lived in West Hollywood his entire life. People like Taser didn't eat in famous WeHo diners with prime viewing of the Strip. They ate off the backs of trucks or from trashcans. She wanted to show him a good time and let him listen to a jukebox. In showing him a good time, she hoped it would encourage him to find the location of where Ford ran his prostitution ring. Her lieutenant wanted this job done like yesterday because they'd heard from street noise Ford trafficked girls younger than eighteen. In the five months where she'd cemented herself into the life, she'd still never found his location.

Rivera spotted a rat hiding behind a car. It sat up on its hind legs like it was begging. "No way, pal," she said. "You have too many diseases." The rat blinked and scampered off but not before it turned around to see if she'd changed her mind. "I haven't," she muttered.

Shifting her helmet underneath her arm, she carried it with her to the front door. She'd splurged to buy a top-of-the-line accessory and didn't trust anyone to not take it. At the end of the day, she would always be the girl who ate dog food when she had no money, and she would fight anyone who tried to steal her shit.

CHAPTER 2

GUTIERREZ (AKA TWENTY BUCKS)

Alejandro Gutierrez sat in a booth in the back, his eyes trained on the door while he listened to “Jingle Bell Rock” on the overhead speakers. Mel’s on Sunset was where he always went when he couldn’t sleep, and tonight had been one weird-ass evening.

First, that damn rat was back. He’d seen it a lot in the past year, and no poison on the market could seem to kill it. He’d gone to his private garage to retrieve a file from his car and found the psychotic thing just staring at him. He fired at it with his gun...and missed. He chased after it, and then the damn thing stared as he shot wide again. He returned to his office minus two bullets and had an unexpected visit from Darcy Walker—a rookie police officer fate moved in and out of his life on a weekly basis. Irony was, she showed him a picture she’d snapped of a cute rat in the parking lot. The rodent was sitting up like it was begging her to pet it. *The asshole*. He had no idea of its cosmic significance, but Walker wasn’t afraid of it, nor naively of the diseases it more than likely carried. She was cut from a different cloth.

That made him think of a certain vice detective. If only he could persuade Ruby Rivera to work in his organization. God

knew he needed someone to guard his back...even from those currently on his payroll.

When he'd become restless, he'd gone for a drive. He wound up where he always did—Mel's Drive-In on Sunset Strip.

Mel's wasn't only a place to feed the carnivore in him. Right then, it was a means to an end. He sought information on two men. First was Alan Dawson, a city attorney. He needed Dawson in his hip pocket so that his newest business venture would reach its full potential. If anyone started snooping into its legalities, he needed Dawson to redirect them.

Dawson sat in his usual spot and this time with a different woman. He didn't think Dawson to be so stupid to bring a mistress to a public place, which meant the thin brunette probably worked for him. They sat entirely too close—not like employer and employee. If something hadn't happened between them, it most certainly would soon.

And the moment it did, Gutierrez would remind him of his marital vows.

In fact, he might do that right now. He motioned a server to his table. "Yessir?" she said when she made it to his side.

"Could you send an appetizer plate to Mr. Dawson and his new wife?" He knew it wasn't his wife. "Let him know it's a wedding gift from me."

She scurried back to the kitchen and quickly returned with a sampling of all Mel's offered, placing it on Dawson's table. Dawson held up a hand in protest, like he hadn't ordered it, but when she pointed to Gutierrez, Dawson drew in a quick breath when they met eyes.

"Congratulations," Gutierrez said. "Sorry I missed the wedding."

Dawson knew immediately the game he was playing, sending him a tight smile and scooting away from the young brunette to a more acceptable distance.

To Gutierrez's right sat a congressman. To his left was a thoracic surgeon. Directly in front of him sat a man who was on the city council named Lowell Ressler—with a woman as the known mistress. Ressler was the second reason Gutierrez had gone to Mel's. Ressler had confronted Gutierrez once over whether his career in real estate meant he'd totally left his gang life behind. Of course, he had lied.

Gutierrez was the West Coast Padre to an organization known as AVO, or Amor Vincit Omnia, who occasionally went by an old street name of Twenty Bucks. Irony was, Amor Vincit Omnia was Latin for "love conquers all."

Gutierrez assured Ressler the gang life was behind him, but that one conversation meant Ressler wouldn't quit watching. Ressler, however, wasn't as clean as the political platform he was elected on claimed. Gutierrez knew he was on the payroll of several businessmen in town, directing money to them when contracts were supposed to be fair and square. When Ressler dumbly confronted Gutierrez, Gutierrez unveiled his suspicions. Ressler vehemently denied, but what was that Shakespearean phrase about protesting too much?

Yes. Ressler protested too much.

Just to yank his chain, Gutierrez stared so hard it was inevitable they would eventually meet eyes. "Hello, Ressler," he said. "How's the contract business going?"

Extortion and greasing palms were par for the course in Gutierrez's type of work.

And so highly enjoyable.

Ressler squirmed in his seat. "Business is fine. And how are things in your world?"

"More enlightening every day."

Ressler squirmed even more. "Is that so?"

"Absolutely crystal."

Gutierrez gave Ressler the smile of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Then took a long pull on his Heineken and

relished in the solitude. He'd just ended a relationship with Ariana Redstone a few months earlier, a six-foot redheaded model nearly fourteen years his junior. Ariana was a sweet soul, and Gutierrez still didn't understand why she'd pursued him, but she had. They'd become acquainted when she'd bumped his BMW. At first, Gutierrez was ticked as hell someone had rear ended him, but then he found Redstone in tears because she was late for a photo shoot. They'd exchanged information, and where he'd believed he would never hear from her again, she showed up to his office with a bottle of champagne as an olive branch. Things between them had been good for about five months, but then business took her one way and him another.

Rarely did he venture out in public without Kodiak and Pablo—his bodyguards, for lack of a better phrase. Kodiak was Russian, and his primary job was to make cold calls and keep contacts warm—a PC phrase where he paid personal visits to those who owed Gutierrez money when he loan sharked. Kodiak wasn't a deep thinker, but he was loyal as hell, and Gutierrez and he had forged a friendship when he was a janitor for a private daycare Gutierrez's daughter attended. Pablo, however, was another story. Gutierrez didn't trust him as far as he could throw him, but he'd inherited him when his former boss died. Pablo had strong connections south of the border with the head boss, Tomas. Gutierrez suspected him to be a stool pigeon, reporting back on Gutierrez's business dealings behind his back. He'd confronted Pablo with as much, but as expected, he'd denied it all.

Feeling Ressler's scrutinizing gaze made him think about his life. More specifically, the journey he'd taken to end up in the deadliest gang of all time.

He'd illegally crossed the Mexican border with his mother and father nearly three decades earlier. His father was barely making ends meet until he met a coyote, a person hired to

smuggle Mexican workers across the border. The man promised transport to the United States, a better paying job, and a fast-track to legal citizenship. His father had sold everything they had to pay the fees. Little did Gutierrez know his life would change drastically the day that transaction occurred.

He remembered the journey vividly. He and his mother slept the majority of the daytime hours because they'd planned to travel by night. In pitch darkness, the coyote led them across the Rio Grande River. Gutierrez was a decent swimmer, but not so decent that he hadn't been scared. When all three successfully crossed the river, the coyote shot his parents right in front of him and dragged him to an AVO outpost. He soon discovered the coyote was a member of AVO—tricking parents into thinking they would make it to the land of freedom when all they'd wanted was to steal their children for gang use.

That was his first taste of evil...and he'd been nine.

Fearing for his life, he did as AVO instructed, and the longer he did it, the more he realized the memories of his parents and their love dimmed.

At first, Gutierrez was an errand boy, doing anything to keep food in his stomach. Then he was ordered at age thirteen to carry out a hit on an AVO member who was working with the feds. He still felt the pull of the trigger. His hand shook and sweated so much he almost dropped the gun. He sobbed when he realized it was that man or him. The fed had told him it was okay, not to worry, and not to let the organization steal his soul. Then the bullet exploded from the gun and half the man's head went one way while the other half went the other. That one step into psychopathy, as a consequence, led Gutierrez down a path where he was constantly ordered to kill. Soon after, Gutierrez's services commanded payment. Gutierrez didn't know what he should charge people. He thought twenty bucks sounded good, and the name stuck on the street. The price, however, did not. When he delivered one of his targets—with

zero to little evidence being left at a scene—he raised that price and was pleased to discover people would accept higher rates for his expertise.

As a result, he worked his way up the AVO hierarchy, establishing a name for himself as a sought-after hitter. As a hitter for AVO, there was no room for emotion. He had his mark, stalked the person as prey, and when he found a moment to provide the least amount of exposure, he struck. Unless AVO wanted to send a message and go on record as the group responsible. Gutierrez hated those assignments. They were messy and could be political with other organizations, but he had no choice if he wanted to stay alive. AVO ground up its wayward members into worthless spittle then chucked them out, demanding they perform or the next slap on the wrist would be permanent. He'd seen that and had been the one sending the message.

About eight years earlier, however, he performed a hit for the area boss of the West Coast. Soon after, he was promoted to his right hand. As a result, he learned the real estate market—the man's legitimate business—while overseeing his dealings in loansharking and theft. The longer he was with his new boss, the more Gutierrez wanted the man's life. If that happened, he could be the one pulling his own strings and engineering his next steps. He watched how things were resolved in-house and against those at odds with AVO. He studied the politics of it all—what would a hasty killing look like internally and conversely on the street. He evaluated the mistakes and missteps of his new boss, and when lung cancer took him, he stepped into the position with a business plan in place to keep AVO on top while ridding themselves of some festering boils.

Some members on the street participated in murder, rape, and home invasions, but Gutierrez's plan was to steer members away from those sorts of pastimes. His latest venture was identity theft being run under the guise of a computer program-

ming company. Those who worked for him were top of the line hackers.

Gutierrez had assimilated into his new lifestyle easily—that is the lifestyle in the real estate market, the part of him that for all intents and purposes was legitimate. He knew how to dress for success. Pick out the perfect suit. Knot the perfect tie. He'd studied those he'd had to kill or learned the craft from YouTube videos. But sometimes—on a night like tonight—he was still the young boy who came to America thinking he would participate in that thing called the American Dream.

In the nearly three decades he'd been in the United States, he'd received his legal citizenship—through illegal channels, he was sure. All he knew was his boss gave him papers and told him not to lose them. He'd guarded them as much as he'd guarded the little girl who'd come into his life fifteen years earlier. Her name was Noe. He still had those papers. Noe, however, was a different story.

At age four, Noe had come to the United States as a drug mule. She didn't even know her last name. Gutierrez was to pick up drugs in a simple hand-off of product and money, but the man using her pissed Gutierrez off when he struck her in the face. Something instinctual reared up inside him, and he shot him without a second's thought. Then Gutierrez realized he had a four-year-old on his hands with no way of sending her back to her mother and father. Besides, for all he knew they'd sold her. He took her to a church orphanage—the one where he occasionally went to sing in a choir. The moment he left her, however, Noe cried so much he wound up taking her with him. He enrolled her in the best of schools. Paid for her to attend UCLA. He made sure she had everything he'd been denied.

God Almighty he missed her and her sense of humor. She was the only thing about him that ensured he had somewhat of a soul left. He was left to navigate his demons alone, wondering if they would steal what remnants of a soul he had left. She'd

resurrected that feeling of love his parents had given him. Now he wasn't sure what he was.

"Aw, Noe, girl. I miss you so," he said under his breath. "I miss putting up a Christmas tree. I miss buying you gifts. I miss your laugh."

He shook off the emotion, refusing to think about the little girl he'd raised since age four...who hadn't even been dead a year. He would think about her tonight. He always did before he closed his eyes. When his mind jumped to Ruby Rivera, he pushed her out too. But like always, the feisty Latina pushed her way back inside.

Like a funnel cloud he couldn't outrun.

The last thing he needed was another mental visit from the LAPD detective who worked in vice. She'd helped him get his revenge against the men who'd harmed Noe, and she'd used him as much as he'd used her in the past months. In fact, he'd run point for her on a job in Compton a few weeks earlier and hadn't heard from her since. That chafed when he thought about it, especially since he'd left Hub City with a lot of bruises.

As much as he tried to condemn her to the bedrock of his brain, she insisted otherwise. *Damn*, he thought. He didn't like caring for anyone, and he thought about her too much lately—and her cute little ass on that Harley.

Funny thing was, right then she walked through the door.

CHAPTER 3

RIVERA

Rivera took two steps inside and collided with the thick, muscular back of a man. Her eyes traveled from his contoured waist to the V of his wide shoulders, emphasized by the lean cut of his gray polo shirt. Just the type of look and physique she liked. “I’m so sorry,” she said quickly into his *latis-simus dorsi*. “My bad.”

“Hey, it’s all good,” he murmured without turning around.

Hearing that deep voice, her pulse blipped. The moment he pivoted, her stomach did a back flip. Aw, for crying out loud. It was Jimmy Roper—the ex-boyfriend. She gave him a tight smile and small wave. His eyes rounded in shock as his gaze slowly slid over her face. She was impressed he recognized her. The last time they’d been together, she was Z, a high school girl with short black hair who had tattoos on her arms. Z dated a drug dealer. With Crush’s colored extensions, contacts, and facial ink, she couldn’t be more different.

After a few blinks to register, he smiled.

Six feet tall, Roper was a TO, or training officer, at the academy. They’d graduated together, and he pretty much looked the same as he had then. With a bald head and blue-green eyes, he

had the muscles of a wrestler but sensitive eyes that sucked her in any time she was in his presence. He was all-business on the job, but in the quiet of the two of them alone, he'd been nothing but a steady force—having no vices other than an addiction to nightly popcorn. She'd loved Jimmy Roper from the first day she'd laid eyes on him, even when she had no right. But his heart belonged to her best friend, Jessie. Jessie died during her probationary period, eleven months after graduation. She'd been the object of a targeted attack by three teenagers who hated police officers. When Jessie's partner was shot in the head, she battled off two, but then a third showed, took her gun, and shot her in the chest. She and Roper had been the academy power couple, and although he'd dated several women since she passed, none had successfully locked him down...until Rivera.

Or so she thought.

She opened her mouth to speak, but a tall blond with blue eyes the color of cobalt strode to his side and fished her arm around his waist, tucking her thumb in the belt loop of his worn jeans. She gave Rivera half a smile as she sipped from the straw of a damn juice bar drink. Rivera recognized her from the Police Administration Building downtown as Ashley Stevens.

Stevens worked in intelligence, compiling field information—the exact opposite of Rivera who was the one gathering it. Stevens being in law enforcement stung a bit. Rivera had always believed their breakup had been because her career in vice had her going off grid for days at a time. It didn't look like Roper had a problem with a woman wearing a badge.

That meant Roper had a problem with *her*.

The asshole hadn't waited but what...eight weeks? Or goodness, had it been eight months since she'd seen him last?

By the looks of things, he was trying to replace Jessie, too, because Ashley Stevens resembled her almost to a T. She had on a tight black sweater. Just like Jessie used to

wear. And jeans that highlighted long legs and a tight butt. Again, Jessie's stats. That made Rivera even angrier. Maybe she'd been nothing but a temporary replacement in the first place.

Which meant all those tears had been a waste of time and bodily fluid.

Is it hot in here?

Rivera felt sweat pool underneath her leather jacket, and she peeled it off before she passed out. When she remembered her tank top underneath showcased the fact she wore no bra, she smiled when she saw Jimmy's eyes widen.

"How are you, Roper?" Rivera snarled. Where LEOs, or law enforcement officers, always addressed one another by last names, Roper had always been Jimmy to her. But she flat out refused to give him that familiarity. Besides, she knew why she was having a late-night dinner. But why was he?

A muscle in his jaw ticced. He'd never liked her foul moods, but by the way sparks sprung to life in his eyes, he was prepared to return fire. "Fine. And you?" He snapped out his words.

Rivera shrugged. "Oh, just licking my wounds." She deliberately ran her eyes over Ashley. "Some of us have a harder time getting over things. But you know, maybe that's just me. I tend to be loyal."

His jaw ticced even faster, and his date looked flat-out confused—like Rivera spoke a foreign language, and she was too dumb to read social cues. Her eyes darted back and forth between the two of them like she had a seat at Wimbledon.

Roper took an angry step forward, crowding Rivera with his body. As a result, Stevens' hand fell when he moved away. Rivera wanted to laugh out loud at the awkwardness, but somehow kept her mouth in check.

"Some of us didn't want things to end," he growled. "Some of us stayed up all damn night when the person we'd been

dating for almost a year would fall off the face of the earth. Some of us were more emotionally invested.”

Rivera lifted her shoulders once more, pitching her jacket to a free seat. She caught her reflection in a nearby print on the wall. She was rabid. With hair and a face that wasn't even hers. If she barely recognized herself, so how could she expect Jimmy to not occasionally be rattled? Still, she couldn't help but hammer home her point. “I'm not the one with someone else on my arm. Evidence, right? Isn't that what they taught us in the academy?”

“It also taught us not to jump to judgment.”

“Touché, asshole. Don't jump to damn judgment on what I was feeling, doing, or how the passage of time went for me. So eat your fucking words for dessert...or with your popcorn. Whatever comes first.”

Stevens still sipped from that damn straw of her juice drink. In fact, Rivera couldn't even tell if she was offended. And side note, what self-respecting police officer ordered from a damn juice bar?

Roper squinted his eyes shut, and Rivera knew that was because he didn't know what name she was using tonight. “Please,” he said quietly.

Rivera didn't like the way his voice made her feel. She'd thought she was done with him, but something in his voice would always call to her.

“It's me, tonight, asshole,” she said, interrupting him with her brainwaves betraying her. “Just me. The *real* me, all right? And with you, it was *always* the real me, regardless of what my outward appearance suggested. But that didn't seem to be enough.”

He grabbed her by the wrist, his eyes tortured. “You don't understand,” he said, his voice thick. “All I ever wanted was for you to be safe. I worried. I *still* worry.”

Seriously, she could do without the faux concern. She

yanked her wrist out of his grasp, his touch branding her with an affection she needed to bury. “Quit with the voice, Roper. Are you sure that’s all you’ve ever wanted? Looks to me like you’re trying to resurrect the past.”

Rivera glanced at Stevens again, hammering home the point she was a second-rate stand-in for Jessie. He blinked a few times before her innuendo registered. “You shut me out,” he said, his voice even thicker.

That part she could take ownership of. She’d broken up with him via a damn phone call. Childish and petty and highly impersonal, but she hadn’t wanted to see his face. She couldn’t stand that she worried him, and she knew better when they’d begun dating. Still, she’d chased a happily ever after, and despite the fact he seemed like an asshole tonight, she knew he wasn’t.

He’d begged for a face-to-face three times, and all three times she turned him down. But the heart was a funny thing, wasn’t it? Roper should be rude to *her*, but she was being a royal bitch because he’d moved on first.

Rivera chewed on her lower lip to keep from crying, grabbed her jacket, and bumped his shoulder when she stepped around him and his date. Sliding into a vacant booth in the back, she placed her helmet on the table. Her hands shook as she watched him leave, and after ten minutes of thinking she could make it through a meal, she stood and headed back for the door. Taser wasn’t coming, and suddenly she’d lost her appetite. Once outside, her eyes canvassed the lot as she crossed it, but the moment she lifted her hands to place her helmet back on her head, someone jumped her from behind and slammed her face first to the ground.

Rivera’s helmet skidded across the asphalt, and the first thing she thought was, *Shit, someone scratched my new helmet.* Rivera didn’t mind a good fight, and God knew she’d never been a spectator. When she regained focus, the teen in front of

her didn't look like he'd fought much before, and no way in hell could he sustain a punch from her when she was angry. Which she was. Jumping up in the graceful crouch of a cat, she didn't even pause for questions. She threw a right, connecting with his jaw so hard she saw blood fly out the side of his sick-ass grin.

CHAPTER 4
GUTIERREZ

Gutierrez tossed a one hundred-dollar bill on the table and made eye contact with his server. Ruby Rivera had his heart in a tight squeeze, and as out of character as it was, he wanted to see her safely home. He'd recognized the man she exchanged words with as her old boyfriend. Gutierrez had watched them together for several months with avid curiosity—not that he was a stalker or anything. It was mere counterintelligence. Rivera was herself with Roper, but in Gutierrez's opinion, Roper was holding his emotions in check. And he didn't think it was because he had another companion with him. The man still cared. And cared very deeply. He'd gazed at Rivera with an instant attraction, and Gutierrez knew enough about relationships to know the man feared Rivera had cheated death one too many times.

There was a chance her lifestyle was too much for Roper. Or maybe Gutierrez just wanted him out of the picture.

What are you doing, Gutierrez? he thought to himself. *You have no place in this woman's life. Not now. Not ever. Mere counter-intelligence.*

Still, he found himself standing and debating whether to go after her.

Alejandro Gutierrez and Twenty Bucks battled every waking hour. The little boy was long gone. He didn't even know what that boy sounded like anymore. Thought about anymore. Dreamt about anymore. The man he was now longed for power. But more than power, he wanted respect—and for some reason, he craved the respect of Ruby Rivera.

Still, he wanted to own her. Consume her. Take her back to his place and throw away the key.

Sliding his arms in the sleeves of his black leather Givenchy jacket, he thought back to his childhood—how he sometimes fought others on the street for a stale piece of bread. He wished he could talk to that thirteen-year-old boy and tell him that one day he could afford a three-thousand-dollar jacket. Perhaps it wouldn't have made his younger self so bitter. Gutierrez also wore expensive clothes because it helped those he encountered get past the AVO and MUT initials on his fingers—the MUT standing for Me, Us, and Them. No one had ever dared ask about them, although it was common knowledge what they represented. Most, after they spoke to him for a few moments, assumed (erroneously, mind you) that he'd somehow gotten out of the life. The human mind had a need to find peace.

Pushing the door wide, a cold air sliced through his gray slacks. Zipping his jacket up, he scouted around for Rivera but didn't get far in the process before he was struck mute by the sight of a young man striking her beside her Harley.

Jesus Christ. That scene was enough for a good forty-five minutes of psychotherapy.

Her fists were up, and blood stained her lips. Rivera returned fire, throwing a left, then another right uppercut. Gutierrez's blood boiled.

"Come on, asshole," she hissed to the young man whose head was bobbing. "Is that all you've got? Or are you the type to poke me in the eye and run home to Mommy?"

One day her mouth would get her killed. Gutierrez would

never get over how this woman could fight. She had a face of a goddess but the power of a prize fighter. Her curves and the sashay of her hips made men's eyes bounce in their sockets. She was a breed of her own and could find a way to get what she wanted, looking irresistible as she cast her spell.

She would best her opponent. Gutierrez had no doubt. But he didn't have the patience to watch it unfold with her getting bloodier in the process.

Gutierrez had his nine on him. Lifting it out from underneath his jacket, he thundered forward and pulled it, jamming it into the back of the young man's head. "Drop your fists, motherfucker."

The punk had better comply, or he'd depart with one less head. Or at the least a broken jaw. Gutierrez wasn't in the mood. In that split second, he sized him up. He was not much older than a teenager. He had blond hair, was skinny beyond the norm, and was battling a battlefield of acne. His clothes had holes in them. He'd lay money he was a tweaker.

Gutierrez watched Rivera blink back to reality, struggling to get out of fight-or-flight mode. When she realized the assist came from Gutierrez, she couldn't help but give the asshole a piece of her mind. "You heard him. Stop hitting me, or your brains are going to be sunny-side up on the sidewalk."

At least her sense of humor wasn't extinct, he thought. But Gutierrez was ready to fire anyway just because he was pissed.

Gutierrez held his gun at the young man's skull with one hand while the other yanked both hands behind his back. Rivera immediately went in, frisking him to see if he had weapons along with some form of identification. She fished a wallet from his back pocket and removed the license. Patting herself down with one hand, she couldn't locate her phone. It must've fallen out in the scuffle. "I can't find my phone," she said to Gutierrez.

“Grab mine,” he told her. “Left hand pocket. We’ll find yours later.”

Gutierrez’s pulse kicked up a notch when her left hand made contact with his chest. He’d known her for a year and a half, playing a game of cat and mouse—helping each other out on the field when called for—but they’d only touched once, and that had nearly landed them in bed. Rivera called it off at the last minute.

He watched her shrewd, mismatched eyes as she studied the license.

“Hello, Dickhead. I mean, Matthew Crow. What exactly do you have against me?”

“Nothing. A man paid me fifty bucks to knock you out.”

“I’m at least worth a hundred.” She narrowed her eyes. “Did this man have a name?”

He shook his head. “No. He just wanted me to knock out the woman in black leather pants, so you wouldn’t have a chance to ask questions.”

Gutierrez noticed he hadn’t called her Crush. That’s who she was known as when she was in all leathers.

“I don’t believe you,” Rivera said. “Do you know Taser? Where he is?”

Gutierrez felt the man tense. “Answer her,” Gutierrez ordered, his voice bottoming out.

“I know Taser, but I don’t know where he is,” Crow said.

“You’re lying,” Rivera hissed.

Crow let out an exasperated sigh. “You’re not going to like the answer.”

“Is he dead?” Rivera asked.

Crow winced, like he anticipated another blow to the face. “Last I saw, Taser got into a car with Karlin Skoll.”

Gutierrez saw Rivera swallow. He knew little of Skoll other than reputation claimed him to be the muscle of a man named Chauncey Ford. “Did Skoll ask you to keep me occu-

“pied with your fists?” she asked. Crow nodded. “Describe the car.”

“It was black.”

Gutierrez saw her roll her eyes. “Well, you’re about as useful as the migraine I’m working on,” she muttered. After a few beats, she clicked a picture of his license and then leaned in close to him. “Say cheese, Dickhead. This one here is for my personal scrapbook.”

What do you know, the dickhead said, “Cheese,” and she snapped the photograph.

Rivera slipped the license back in Crow’s wallet and placed it in his pants, doing the same with Gutierrez’s phone. “You’re free to go,” she told Crow, “but if you throw a punch at me again, I’ll cut off your balls.”

What the hell... “You’re letting him go?” Gutierrez said. “He struck you.”

“He’s low level...and knows nothing. Dickhead, here,” she said to Crow, “is going to find out all he can about Skoll and Chauncey Ford and then report back to me, right?”

Dickhead bobbed his head up and down, and Gutierrez reluctantly released him and watched him run off into the night.

“That was a mistake,” Gutierrez told her, placing his own gun back underneath his jacket.

Rivera wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, turning to spit out a bit of blood. About six feet over, she found her phone and snatched it up, sliding it into her jacket. “You don’t have an active role here, Gutierrez. You were barely a bystander. But since I realize that might sound offensive, thank you for the bailout.”

Gutierrez wasn’t feeling very conciliatory, and frankly, the woman had just insulted him. Strange thing was, he’d let her. He’d killed men for less.

He bent down and picked up her helmet, brushing it off.

The impact of hitting the pavement had indeed left some cuts in the paint job. When she took it from his hands, he murmured, "Next time, the job might be to kill you."

"They can take a number," she muttered, frowning when she saw her scratched helmet.

After she licked her metaphorical wounds, she marched past him and back into Mel's. Gutierrez followed.

"I'm not going to let Jimmy nor dickhead Crow keep me from a burger," she muttered to herself. "They can all kiss my ass. Like literally."

Rivera chose a booth in the back, and once she slid into the seat, she placed her helmet on the tabletop. Gutierrez slid across from her. "Rivera," he said softly. "Would you like to talk?"

She glanced around Mel's. He followed her vision, noticing several pairs of eyes on them. "By the looks I'm getting, it appears I dumped Roper for you...I didn't."

"Do people in here know you as who you really are?" he asked her.

"No."

"Then it isn't a problem."

She snorted. A good mood was an awfully hard thing to keep alive in the face of heartbreak. Her heart was bleeding, and didn't that just piss him off. "You two were dating?" he asked even though he knew the answer.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course, you know we dated. Don't act like you didn't, Gutierrez, because at this point, I'm not sure who is honest in my life."

Gutierrez leaned forward. "I would be honest in your life, Rivera. Always."

She snorted. "Dating you would land me in jail."

Gutierrez laughed with no humor. "I only wish for the opportunity." He stopped. "The dating part, not the jail part, and I know you well enough that something else is steering

your boat—a boat that is way off course. Confide in me, Rivera. You obviously need someone, and I don't like the way that fight went down."

She opened a menu. "Don't worry about me, and if you don't mind, I'd like to be alone."

Gutierrez glanced around Mel's to find Ressler dissecting them like they were in a biology lab. Gutierrez leaned across the table and grabbed Rivera by the lapel of her jacket, pulling her to him. Her eyes flew wide when he kissed her on the lips. The contact was slow because she'd split her lip, but the kiss was deep enough to know he promised a good time if they ever were alone again. "Ressler is watching," he spoke into her mouth. "He fears me. Although this means nothing to you, I want him to know you are under my protection. I'm trying to keep you alive."

Unfazed by the public display of affection, she gazed at Ressler and dropped an F-bomb. *God Almighty*, he thought. *She truly must want to die*. She leaned over on a hip and removed a burner phone from her pants, dialing. After a few rings, she muttered into her phone, "Where are you, Taser?" He heard the worry in her voice. "Call me, asshole. It's Crush, and I'm losing my patience."

CHAPTER 5

RIVERA

Rivera didn't want to touch Gutierrez. The last time she'd touched him she wound up losing part of her clothes—and undoubtedly all her mind. She and Roper had just broken up. She was needy. Gutierrez reminisced about his adopted daughter, Noe. Noe had gotten it into her head to investigate a plot against Gutierrez, thinking she could blackmail the man and get the target off Gutierrez's head. She was caught and punished physically and mentally—punished in ways women feared. Then she was sent back to Gutierrez just so he could watch her die.

When Noe went missing, Gutierrez asked Rivera to find the men responsible. Taking Gutierrez's man, Kodiak, with her, they delivered up the four offenders. She had no idea of their fate but could only guess.

When Gutierrez's eyes filled with tears as he spoke of Noe, she thought of her loss of Jimmy. They fell into one another, needing something good and someone solid to hold onto.

In that moment, Rivera feared she was destined be the loner that her job made her. She was a different person each assignment. All her friendships were fake. Even her nationalities. She sometimes didn't belong anywhere other than with

her little brother, Marco...and other vice detectives. She didn't even take the same route to work each day. Although she effortlessly moved in and out of two languages when called for, on that night, Gutierrez had seen into her soul, and she'd seen into his.

Vice, by its nature, had her making relationships with all kinds of criminals. Alejandro Gutierrez, AKA, Twenty Bucks, just could be the relationship that landed her dead or without a job. There was an undeniable pull that thrilled and terrified her at the same time. She needed a boyfriend, husband—something or someone to keep her emotions in check—but she'd never been the type to be tied down. The longest relationship she had was with her plants. She'd been all-in with Roper, but he couldn't stomach her job. Had he ever admitted as much? No, but she couldn't stand the worry on his face. Unfortunately, her ovaries reminded her she was twenty-eight years old, desiring someone so badly that an evil Spanish persona like Twenty Bucks looked appealing.

She'd only gotten close to him in the past year because he fed her information on the gun business and Slavic Power—that relationship forged when he found her bleeding out when a member of SP stabbed her in Runyon Park. Gutierrez took her to the hospital. Even sent her fucking flowers. There was a definite undercurrent between them that sizzled like a live wire in water. Thing was, that water killed the person dumb enough to stand in the middle of the sizzle.

She'd never liked what she'd seen in Gutierrez. Add on that she suspected AVO was involved in bank fraud and identity theft on top of their other exploits, and they were two opposite sides of a coin. In fact, she thought his real estate building was a front for hackers. She couldn't prove it, but she would eventually flip someone inside his building. Plus, he'd been a hitter, for godsake. Nothing about taking lives for cash was honorable. But that night, it hadn't seemed to matter. Something in his

soul—those dark, ancient eyes—had called out to her. He had a jagged scar over his upper lip, and when his mouth touched hers, they...

Rivera halted her thinking processes before they landed her naked.

She ordered a burger, fries, and two Mountain Dews. She felt a migraine coming on, and to get a jump on it, she needed some caffeine. She and Gutierrez settled into small talk with her asking what he knew about Chauncey Ford and the prostitution market. Gutierrez didn't have much to say but promised he would look into the whereabouts of Ford the following day.

When her food arrived, she bowed her head for a two-worded prayer and bit into her R-66 burger, pushing her fries to Gutierrez out of politeness. He declined but sipped from a coffee he'd ordered. Things were not awkward between them, and the fact they weren't made Rivera uneasy. His deep, accented voice had comforted her to her core. *Just what she needed*, she thought sarcastically. Being saved by a fricking former hitter. Actively watched by the FBI and DEA. Probably the ATFE if she cared to research it out.

Taking a breather from her burger, she glanced up, feeling Gutierrez stare at her with the intensity of a mountain climber without oxygen.

"Why in God's name are you still in the booth with me, Walter?" she snapped. Walter was the English form of Gutierrez. She used it merely to get on his nerves. But her tone reminded her of Jimmy Roper's.

Rude. But she didn't care. She refused to get sucked in.

"Were you ever going to call me after I helped your friend in Compton?"

Oh, that.

Rivera had a long-time snitch who'd phoned for help while in Compton, being chased by Slavic Power. She was on one end of the city, and Gutierrez was on the other—and consequently

closer to her snitch. Gutierrez helped him dodge a knife by knocking the SP out cold in what her snitch claimed was like a demon fighting to make it back inside Heaven. She should've followed up. She didn't. Oh well.

"I apologize I've been stand-offish," she said.

He opened his mouth to comment, but then her burner phone rang. Only a handful of people knew Crush's digits other than Taser—the prostitutes she worked with, her little brother, Lieutenant Paddy O'Leary of the West Los Angeles Division, and his Wilshire Division counterpart.

She pulled her cell out of her pocket, briefly closing her eyes. She didn't want to speak to any of them. "Crush," she finally said into the receiver.

"Hawareya, Rivera? It's Paddy. Do you have a minute?"

Lieutenant Paddy O'Leary was her direct boss. He always referred to himself by his first name when they were off the clock. A big Irishman, he regularly wore mismatched clothing because he was colorblind. He had one hell of a past, and man, was he formidable in the field.

"Yessir," she said, not able to break protocol. "I'm having a burger, celebrating beating the shit out of Matthew Crow. Ford sent him to beat me up. Don't worry though. My cover is solid."

Lieutenant O'Leary wasn't fazed. He knew she could fight. "I'm assuming you won since you're eating a burger."

"I did, so carry on, sir."

He laughed. "Ford's the reason I'm calling. I've got a lead."

Her ears perked up. "Oh yeah?"

"A neurosurgeon was seen picking up a girl on the Strip. My source was delivering a pizza close by, and when she got stiffed, she hit up Sunset looking for a homeless man she's befriended. She stuck around because something didn't feel right, and twenty minutes later, the surgeon dropped off the girl he'd picked up."

Lieutenant O'Leary said his source approached the prosti-

tute, and the call girl claimed the surgeon occasionally went for two a night, splitting his time between Marathon and Wester and the Strip.

“Busy guy,” Rivera muttered.

“Loaded guy,” he clarified. “This guy is rolling in so much dough he’s not going to just mess with low-level call girls. If that’s his thing, he’s going to want some high-end entertainment too. If you need a location on Ford, put a tracker on this guy.”

She planned to. “When did you get this tip?”

“About an hour ago.”

“You trust your source?” Of course, he did, but she felt like she wouldn’t be doing her due diligence if she didn’t ask.

He chuckled deep in his throat. “Oh, yeah, doll. It’s Darcy Walker. We were just having ice cream, and she spilled her guts.”

Rivera frowned, looking for the server to give her a bill, so she could get back on her Harley and scout for pervert neurosurgeon. In the process, she locked eyes with Ressler, the man Gutierrez said feared him. He looked harmless. In her experience, that meant he had people who were in his employ to do the dirty work.

“Why does that name sound so familiar?” she asked.

“She’s my godson’s girlfriend. She lives with Captain Taylor and is the one in the academy whose mother was murdered in front of her when she was young. Does that jog your memory?”

Yes, it did. Darcy Walker had an FBI file on her. She’d been kidnapped in high school, and Captain Taylor’s grandson infiltrated a fight club to save her, tag-teamed by Captain Taylor and Lieutenant O’Leary. How did Rivera know? Roper had some knowledge, but then a friend of hers, a federal marshal, added more detail—right before he went to the dark side and fell in love, or lust, with his mark. He’d died as a result.

Rivera chose to stick with the conversation she and Roper

had had one evening...over his damn popcorn. Walker had been one of his recruits.

“Jimmy spoke fondly of her,” she told O’Leary. “He said there’s something in her eyes that’s going to make her one of the greats if she doesn’t get killed first.”

O’Leary laughed a hollow sound. “Don’t worry about Walker. I think the devil might be on her payroll,” he said in his Irish brogue. “But I seem to remember having that thought about you too.”

Compliments of any kind made Rivera uncomfortable. She didn’t know why. Perhaps it was because she’d never received them growing up.

“You got a name for me?” she asked, quickly interrupting his train of thought.

“I’ll text you his picture and information.”

Rivera finished her burger in three more bites and stood, sliding long fingers into the side of her jacket. Gutierrez quickly followed suit and opened his wallet before she could pay, throwing another hundred-dollar bill on the table to pay for her dinner. She muttered, “I’m not paying that back, Gutierrez,” and then an idea hit her. Men like Gutierrez had one speed. If he considered an enemy a road bump, more than likely he’d run him over. She didn’t know what was ahead of her with a man like Ford or even the john she was currently hoping showed on the corner. All she knew was she could use someone who didn’t care to get his hands dirty if things went upside down. And as it were, she was flying solo. When she was on an op, she had men in the field who regularly followed her as a safety precaution. They went off the clock the moment she ditched the assignment and headed to Mel’s.

Before her brain could talk herself out of it, she said, “In the mood to hunt big game?”

He raised a dark eyebrow. “It’s what I do best...but only if you do something in return.”

