

RIDE OR DIE SAMPLE

A CRIME FICTION THRILLER

A. J. LAPE

CONTENTS

1. Ride or Die	1
2. Portal to Hell	13
3. Puke Patrol	22
4. God's Hand	31
5. Bump & Run	44
6. Redneck Ranch	56

CHAPTER 1

RIDE OR DIE

My name's Darcy Walker, and I've always lived my life one way—ride or die. Thing is, that unabashed loyalty—and some personality flaws—almost got me killed a few times.

I'm a rookie police officer with the Los Angeles Police Department.

That ride-or-die attitude had certainly come in handy, but I'd grossly underestimated that the *die* part could literally be an everyday thing. Where we all were born with the innate sense for self-preservation, those of us in law enforcement had made a conscious choice to run to the danger and place someone else's life ahead of our own.

Honorable? Most definitely.

Suicidal? It depended on who you asked.

Most nights were explosive action mixed with solemn bits of reality. Others were writing reports in your squad car and ushering drunks back to the land of the cognizant before they slid behind the wheels of their cars. One thing I could say for certain was that activity on the night shift was more than the day shift saw in an entire week—the biggest difference being that action and situations could flip on a dime.

Dodging wayward bullets didn't necessarily frighten me—especially since I'd tagged a bullet as a night delivery driver for Rollo's Ugly Pizza. As a law enforcement officer, or LEO, my job was to predict the bad things people were going to do in order to keep them on a sound trajectory. Turns out I'd been gifted with exceptional abilities in the who's-about-to-implode department, especially when the suspects were total psychopaths with zero conscience.

In my mere twenty-five days on the job, by the grace of God, I had no lasting scars and still showed up for work when the city of Los Angeles mandated. But I still suffered from a case of the shock-and-awes at what my mind and body endured to get here. I'd run every morning at five-thirty a.m., singing battle hymns at the top of my lungs. I'd been pepper sprayed in the face and taught how to properly wreck a car. I could triage victims, identify street drugs, and survive Darwinian tests engineered to make me crack. I'd survived bodily projectiles, having been puked on by fellow classmates who couldn't handle an extra mile instructors demanded just because they were in a Machiavellian mood. My personal favorite? I'd wrestled with a police officer posing as a homeless man, who propositioned me to play with his anaconda (I didn't).

I had a harried past of next-level fear—surviving a kidnapping and school shooting, all in between discovering dead bodies and bringing their murderers to justice. In some ways, my past experiences prepared me for the chaos of walking a beat. Some incidents my actions caused. Others were thrust upon me with no chance to hammer out a deal or beg, *Please don't*.

The biggest *please don't* I'd uttered to the universe was for my mother to not die. I'd learned at the tender age of nine that sometimes we didn't get do-overs—that things like life and death were set in stone. Purpose, however, could rise from the ashes of loss and despair if you would let it. And I'd had the

shield pinned to my chest, so I could make a difference in the world.

I gazed out the window and placed my hand up against the cool glass, trying to find a glimpse of my mother in the twinkling stars. Sometimes I could sense her—at weird, random times and places. And it was a déjà vu that rattled me to my bones.

“Did I get it right, Momma? Are you proud? Scared? Disappointed? None of the above? All of the above? Rip off the Band-Aid, okay? Should I have stayed in pizza delivery?”

I winced, bracing for something bad.

Please don't answer yes to the last one.

When I received no return opinion, I bit a chunk out of my PB&J sandwich and shoved the non-answer where I did everything else that didn't make sense—in the bedrock of my brain reserved for the therapist I'd never see.

I twisted in my seat, trying to locate my partner and field training officer, Barron Ramsey. We'd first become acquainted when he answered my 911 call for assistance in rescuing a woman held captive by an Ugly Pizza customer. Ramsey had not always worked in this precinct, having begun his career in Watts. The Watts area was one of the toughest in LA, but Ramsey requested a transfer to work under Captain Lincoln Taylor. When Ramsey's partner retired a few months prior, Ramsey wound up with me.

I'd only been on the force for a short while, but where my job was not only to protect the good citizens of Los Angeles County but to keep my partner alive—somehow, I felt his heartbeat like my own.

And Barron Ramsey? Well, he needed someone not only to watch his back but to keep his secrets.

Ramsey was working his way through the phonebook, i.e., in the carnal sense, if you know what I mean. His tendency to go Ron Burgundy mostly occurred during his downtime, but I

had a feeling those extracurricular activities were happening during his lunch break—which for the night shift (seven to seven in a twelve-hour compressed schedule) fell around one a.m.

We'd parked our squad car—a Dodge Charger referred to as our *shop*—in the lot of 7-Eleven off Westwood Boulevard and Weyburn Avenue. Ramsey had some business in a nearby hotel (translation: girl parts) that he said was important. I said, "Okay," and he locked me inside the car with a window cracked like a person would a dog.

At six foot one and cut like expensive marble, I understood the temptation of Ramsey. He had rich mahogany hair, navy-blue eyes, and a dimple in his right cheek as deep as a sinkhole. His smile was the first thing that lassoed a woman in. I called it the rocker snarl—only one side of his lip quirked up when grinning. An all-star athlete in high school, he'd planned to make hockey a career until a clip to the back of the head left him out cold on the ice, ending his dream.

Ramsey was not the type to stew in his abrupt change of plans, so he followed in his father's footsteps and joined the academy, patrolling for seven years. He was sharp, quick on his feet, and the first to answer an S.O.S. when an officer was outnumbered. Thing was, he was one of those officers his peers either loved or hated despite his dedication to the shield. Some of the jealousy stemmed from Ramsey being able to have any woman he wanted. And some originated from Ramsey's smart mouth. My partner didn't take even a minor ribbing and gave just as good as he got. I had a feeling his current *afternoon delight* was getting a lot of him because this go around was going into overtime.

He'd estimated his ETA to be fifteen minutes. He was working on thirty.

I licked some peanut butter off my fingertips and spoke into my Apple Watch, sending him a text. "Bruuuuh. You're killing

me. Muzzle the shama lama, ding-dong, and bug outta there. And use protection, all right? Like seriously. You don't need an extra tax deduction."

I groaned and melted into my seat. It was a cloudy, early November morning, and the temp was holding steady at fifty-one degrees. Where LA was normally the land of sunshine, November marked the start of the rainy season, peaking at the beginning of the new year. Unfortunately, it wasn't raining enough to put out the wildfires that sometimes appeared to start themselves.

Checking my appearance in the reflection of my iPhone, I had a moment of silence in respect of the good hair day I'd had upon rising. It died right around eight p.m. when Ramsey and I waded into a 243—domestic battery—between Ronnie and Maria Garcia. I got hit by a wayward fist.

The things I do for society.

Despite being a reluctant (and hormonally frustrated) twenty-one-year-old virgin, I sometimes debated the appeal of relationships when the players were as volatile as a block of C-4.

While I attempted to fix my hair, I finished my last bite of PB&J and switched the music to Yacht Rock Radio. Thumbing the volume down a notch, I eyed the half-eaten doughnut Ramsey had left in his seat. Ethics told me to leave it. That doughnut, though, reminded me I was her b*tch.

Stuffing it in my mouth, I reached for my Big Gulp in the console and swallowed a drink down, doodling on a Target receipt until my pen ate a hole through the paper.

My personal life was in turmoil.

Other than the unpredictability of my job, I had a boyfriend I didn't see live-and-in-person as much as I'd like. Somehow, we'd kept our love boat afloat, but I had to wonder what the future entailed. He was due to graduate from college in May and would inevitably make a mark in the professional football

arena the moment his cleats hit the turf. Dylan Taylor was a Hall of Famer in the making, and it was speculated he would double down on his childhood dream of claiming the Heisman Trophy by winning it for a second time next month. He'd logged twenty-five QB sacks in the season so far, and playoffs hadn't even started.

I pondered my own long-sleeved, navy uniform. It had two buttoned pockets over each side of my chest with my name plate over the right pocket and my badge above my heart. The shirt was a size too big, so it could accommodate a sports bra, tank top, and body armor. On my chest was a bodycam above the tie clip that held my necktie in place. It activated once I pulled my weapon or could be done manually. Around my waist was a utility belt that held a taser, stun gun, handcuffs, ticket writer, baton, O.C. spray, and spare magazines of bullets. To top off the androgynous fashion, ugly, black cop shoes were on my feet that were slip-resistant. I'd chosen this uniform and all it represented, but I'd grossly underestimated what it would feel like for Dylan to be in one zip code with me in another... possibly permanently.

Not to mention, what it meant for my relationship with my father and little sister. A little sister who'd just gone through her first breakup and was bawling daily without me to lean on.

As if the universe longed to punch me in the gut more, right then I received a text from her on my watch. It was a little after four o'clock in the morning on the East Coast. A heartbreak didn't respect the normal sleeping hours.

Can you FaceTime? she messaged.

I had a few minutes left on my lunch break. Finding my phone in the cupholder, I dialed her number. "Hey," I said when she answered.

Save for the fact she was a nudist as a child, Marjorie, although preteen, was still the picture of a child sin hadn't gotten ahold of yet. Clad in pink pajamas, her curly red hair

stuck out like a beehive. She'd slept a little but definitely not restfully.

She blinked big, blue eyes. "I'm just so sad," she said. "Why doesn't any boy like me?"

My heart cringed. She was too young to worry about the opposite sex, but I'd never been a rational creature either. Half the problem was she'd skipped a grade and was around kids sometimes two years older. That promotion seemed like a good idea at the time. In practice, it had been an epic fail.

"God has someone better, M," I told her. Then I recycled words about love and loss and how we couldn't let tough moments destroy us. I doubted it would lessen her pain, but at least I'd hit all the points a *Glamour* magazine told me I should.

"Love you." She yawned. "Going to try to sleep."

Hanging up with a guilt that choked me, a knock on the window jarred me from the self-loathing. On instinct, I wrapped my fingers around my GLOCK 22 .40-caliber. "Hey, bitch, you gotta twenty?" I heard a man say through the glass.

Mind you, I had on a badge, but the guy was three-sheets-to-the-druggie wind and felt no fear. "I'm on my lunch break...*bitch*," I punted back to him.

Captain Lincoln Taylor, my boyfriend's grandfather and supervisor in the West LA Division, advised officers to stay in their lanes as long as possible. When behavior escalated, that was our cue to get involved. When the man knocked once more, I made a move to exit the car, but he shoved his hip into the passenger side door, boxing me in. Half a smoking cigarette balanced on his lower lip, and his smile was sharp and shiny—like a Moray eel poised to bite. His lips were burned and scabby—probably due to the butane lighter he used to ignite a crack pipe.

He repeated his, "Hey, bitch," statement.

Why can't people leave a girl alone on her lunch break?

"Dammit," I muttered. I had a swear jar in my father's house

he used to insist I deposit change in when a naughty word slipped out. At the ripe old age of twenty-one, I now allowed myself one curse word a day. Sometimes it bled into two...or three. Why had I chosen dammit? I liked to believe I was doing God a favor and telling him who to take a closer look at. You know, if He was busy and all.

I changed tactics when the butthead kept fumbling with the handle on my locked door. "What's your name, sir?" I asked through the window I'd left a three-inch crack in for fresh air.

"Louie. Just Louie."

Of course, his name would be stupid. "Why don't you step aside, Just Louie, so I can exit my car and introduce myself properly?"

"Nope. Don't need an introduction, but I'll take your name and number, baby."

That wasn't the first time I'd been asked for my digits since moving to California, especially when I delivered pizzas to fraternity houses. I pulled out my standard line, going old school Tommy Tutone. "Name's Jenny," I said. "Phone number is eight, six, seven, five, three-o-nine."

The joke was lost on Louie.

There were many things I could do in a situation like the present. I could talk, negotiate, pray he didn't shoot me through my rolled down window, or I could pull on him and tell him to back away.

Slowly removing my firearm, I ordered him to step aside, but Louie elbowed out my window and came at me faster than Usain Bolt going for gold. I landed flat on my back, sandwiched amidst the shotgun and rifle between Ramsey's and my seats. Louie's breath ghosted over my face, ripe with liquor, sweat, and a several-pack-a-day habit. I wasn't sure what Louie's endgame was, but his hand was too close to my unholstered gun. As I wriggled underneath him, Louie somehow kept me on my back, his smoker mouth choking me with shaky breaths

and a cigarette that refused to fall. I kneed him in the groin, getting nowhere. I attempted a headbutt with no success. Reaching for my ankle, I grabbed at my backup gun (Hail Mary), but couldn't extend my hand past my calf. During the scuffle, I located a cigarette lighter that had fallen from his shirt, flicked it on, gave it a few beats to cook, and then burned his forehead with the flame.

"Lick my sweaty balls, mother-trucker," I growled. "After you fry first."

That got the effer off me.

Next thing I knew, I heard Ramsey behind Louie, pulling him out by his waist and taking him down in a body slam. Ramsey took the brunt of the fall, cracking his head on the asphalt with a loud *kabam*. Louie was too stoned to even ugh from the sudden change of venue.

"Jesus H. Christ, Walker," Ramsey cursed. He flipped Louie over and positioned his knee in his back.

Was that like Jesus' middle name?

Placing both hands over my ears, I hummed in a loud pitch. I didn't know a lot about religion, but even I knew you shouldn't use Jesus' name in an unholy veneration. I hissed like an adder. "Watch your tongue, Ramsey. I've already got enough bad luck."

Ramsey obviously didn't worry about what Jesus thought. His conversation was sprawling with expletives, eyes wide with fear as he felt like I'd just cheated death.

I gripped the door frame and pushed the door wider, exiting the car while Ramsey helped Louie to a stand and asked him to place his hands on the hood of our car. Searching his pockets, Ramsey found a baggy of weed, a couple of Addys, Z-bars, and a pack of cigarettes.

"Gimme another?" Louie asked. His cigarette was floating in a nearby mud puddle. He hadn't even cared about his charges. Priorities and all.

Ramsey tapped the bottom of the package for a fresh cancer-stick then placed it in Louie's mouth, setting it ablaze with the lighter I'd fried him with. While Louie took a long inhale to coat his lungs, Ramsey informed Louie he had him for assault, disobeying an officer, and felony possession of narcotics. When he recited his Miranda rights and cuffed him, Louie simply said, "Cool."

Right about then, I got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Louie muttered behind his cig, "Fat Tony sent me, and Fat Tony's gonna be mad."

Annnnnnd *that* was the reason for the bad feeling.

I massaged the migraine burrowing into the back of my head. If I were a three-hundred-pound, sack-of-shiz butthead, where would I hide? The Vegas buffet.

Here was a little rewind of my limited association with Fat Tony. My boyfriend and I went to Vegas a week and a half earlier. Fat Tony was the three-hundred-pound dumbass I beat in poker. Like I destroyed him...twice...taking home four grand. Fat Tony was crude, condescending, talked about my boobs, but Dylan and I let it play because I wanted the cash. In fact, I returned the flirtation, and the more I flirted, the more stupid he got. So long story short? Not my fault he fell for my game plan.

"So Fat Tony put a hit out on Officer Walker?" Ramsey seethed. His eyes went wide as the possibilities sank in.

Louie's dead eyes got all misty with emotion. "No, Fat Tony's in love with her. He's been scouring LA, and a snitch told him she rode with the chief's son."

Ramsey's father was the Los Angeles Police Chief—as in the boss of every boot and suit on the street. If I thought Lincoln Taylor's name, my mentor, held weight as the most indomitable force to ever work vice, Chief Asher Ramsey reminded me of the tiger, Shere Khan, in *The Jungle Book*. Striking and poised

while you watched him from afar, underneath his skin was a wild predator who would rip you to shreds if you crossed his territory.

“So who’s the snitch?” Honestly, I’d like to know the ID too.

“He didn’t say.” Louie swallowed and glanced at me. “Fat Tony said you ghosted right after you won. It hurt his feelings.”

I repositioned my shirt, refastening the bottom button so I was at least somewhat respectable looking. “Some of us have reputable jobs, Louie, and I’m not giving the money back.”

“Fat Tony doesn’t want the money. Just wants you and a rematch. Blackjack this time.”

Ramsey dropped another JC. “And you were just going to take Officer Walker?” he asked.

Louie blinked. “Well, yeah. Fat Tony said she was the best-looking blond he’s ever seen. I have to agree.”

I was five foot ten, sort of green-eyed, with blond hair that fell past my shoulder blades. Even though I was thin, my muscles were defined, and I had a good butt. But this was Los Angeles—next year, the bulimic waif could reign supreme again. Tipping the scales at one hundred and thirty pounds, though, made me feel like a cow in Hollywood.

When Louie asked if I was his type, I’d reached my mental limit of dealing with men who’d tried to kidnap me—bad memory from the past.

“What happened here today isn’t exactly a Hallmark card, bud,” I said. “If you want to impress a girl, you might start with not trying to kidnap her.”

“Exactly,” Ramsey agreed. “We’ve added attempted kidnapping to your résumé.”

Louie didn’t care. In fact, he was concerned with my choice of career. “Why are you doing a job like this, sugar? I could’ve really hurt you.”

I wasn’t someone who normally sweated what the workforce considered the big stuff. The things I sweated were

whether soup was still on sale when I went to the grocery, and if my tampon was going to do its job when I was in hot pursuit. “Listen, Louie,” I told him. “Thanks for the concern, but lay off the crack. You look like the product of mad pumpkins that did the nasty. And you had an angry daddy, and Momma pumpkin didn’t like it when Daddy took lovin’ to a hard place. So she smashed him, and his seeds went all over your face.”

Ramsey snorted in laughter, then backpedaled but chuckled again even deeper. “Poetic, Walker.” After his laugh died out, his eyes did that soft thing that made women agree to let him go Ron Burgundy. “You okay?” he asked.

Guilt was all over his face. Again, Ramsey’s secrets might kill me before a suspect did.

I grabbed his gaze. “I’ve experienced worse,” was my answer, and no truer statement had been uttered. So true I was shocked I hadn’t left high school without a daily nerve pill.

After we let Louie suck his cigarette down to the butt, he spit it on the ground, and I toed it out, wadding it up with a napkin and tossing it in the floorboard of the shop. Placing his hand on Louie’s greasy hair, Ramsey steered him into the back-seat of the cruiser. Ramsey shut him inside and reclaimed his seat behind the wheel. I slid in beside him and closed my door, yanking my seatbelt down to click it. As I studied my partner punching the key in the ignition, God himself knew Barron Ramsey worried less than me. Whoever thought it was a good idea to put us together was either smoking dope or hated the city of Los Angeles.

Ramsey pulled out of the parking lot and joined Louie singing, “Eight, six, seven, five, three-oh-niiii-eee-iione.”

After one stanza, I joined in.

CHAPTER 2

PORTAL TO HELL

“Just Louie,” real name Louis T. Dickerson, was booked and sent to the LA County Jail. Booking had a field day processing Louie, not to mention my direct superior and watch commander, Sergeant Cameron Pope. My boss was nice enough, but let’s just say if he needed a kidney, I wouldn’t offer the donation. I had to explain my association with Fat Tony came through gambling, and of course, I was rewarded with the customary Pope stare of death. Whatever. Beating Fat Tony had been during my downtime, and last I’d checked, gambling wasn’t illegal in the state of Nevada in a casino.

Although, it was frowned upon as an officer.

Something that might have stunted my career path.

Ramsey and I stood at attention in Sergeant Pope’s office in the West LA Division early Thursday morning. Pope was watch command for the night shift, and as police sergeant, he was the first level of review for officers in the field and back at the station. Watch Command was basically on staff for when your shift went nuclear and a superior officer needed to be on the scene. Their role was to be the level head when officers could be tempted to rush to judgment. When at the office, the sergeant checked paperwork (which was digital and done on

our MDT) to make sure incidents were properly documented and procedure had been followed. Pope had read our report on Dickerson three times, making sure we had noted the terms *use of force* and *attempted kidnapping*, while including the drugs found in his possession and the addition of Fat Tony allegedly requesting Dickerson take me by force.

In light of Dickerson's words, Pope planned to issue a BOLO for Fat Tony, but my guess was he was so far underground he was living like a mole. Fat Tony might be dumb in the gambling department, but apparently, he was no shmuck. After some digging around, we discovered he was a crime lord over a Vegas organized crime syndicate.

My luck astounded me.

Our hands were behind our backs, and it reminded me of rookie evaluation at the academy—when instructors would size us up in one beat, letting us know if our uniforms were clean enough, starched enough, and if our badges were fastened on at the appropriate angle. Pope started with Ramsey. Where Ramsey had two silver chevrons on his sleeves, marking his position as a PO3 or Police Officer 3, Sergeant Pope had three silver hashmarks or service marks worn above the left cuff on his shirt with each stripe representing five years of service. His sleeves showcased an additional three silver chevrons above a rocker, signifying he was a sergeant—a stark reminder I was several positions below him since my sleeves were slick.

Tread lightly.

Opening my mouth, I filled in the blanks. “Fat Tony said I couldn't beat him. I didn't like being challenged, so I proved him wrong. Do I feel bad? No. Because he was fat and a pervert.”

I imagined Fat Tony roasting like a pig over a flame.

Pope scrubbed a hand down his jaw. “And Captain Taylor's grandson was with you,” he said. A question was in his voice.

He narrowed his bland, brown eyes to the point that pupils weren't discernible.

"Yes. Dylan enjoys it when I excel. Namely, in this situation, when I reduced Fat Tony's bank account by four grand."

Ramsey snickered, trying his best to swallow it down. "I see," Pope said.

"It wasn't like we went there to gamble, per se," I explained. "Dylan took me to a show, and I got curious as we cut through one of the casinos. I didn't know I would be good."

That was a lie. I was *always* good at gambling. A problem that had presented itself as something I might need rehab for.

Ramsey chuckled once more and gazed down at his black, shiny shoes as though nothing else had ever been so fascinating. Pope leaned back in his chair, threading his fingers behind his neck and staring. Pope was an average-sized black man, biked to obsession, and had a bald spot on his head that had worked its way into a peninsula shape. No matter how serious a conversation with him could be, I couldn't help but think the state of Florida had eaten through his hair. "Walker, there's a fine line between pessimism and realism," he muttered. "All I know is it's sometimes easier to brace myself for the bad. That way I'm not so surprised when it happens."

A truism I ascribed to myself.

"I'm interpreting that as you have little faith in my abilities," I said.

I went Nelson Mandela and gave Pope my version of the *I Am the First Accused* speech, declaring I longed for a free society where I could both gamble and do my job, living in harmony with others—an ideal for which I was prepared to die. The joke never gained any traction.

Pope continued with his death stare, and that could mean one of two things: number one, I'd hit the nail on the head; or number two, he was worried about me. I doubted he was

worried. His innuendo could be more confusing than why Stonehenge had been built.

The hot seat was getting a little too toasty, especially when he reminded me I'd graduated as the first female cadet and second overall if you counted in the males. As I "yes, sir'd" and nodded appropriately, unfortunately Ramsey's mouth got the better of him because it went against his nature to not push back when someone he cared about was backed into a corner—a trait I could appreciate.

"Sergeant Pope?" he said when Pope placed the final period on his lecture. "You know, it's hard to get ahead on a LEO salary, and Walker wants to be able to—"

Buy a new car.

...house.

...something and not feel guilt or a debilitating panic the second I walked out of a department store.

There was an axiom in the world that if you worked hard and played by the rules, you would get ahead. Not always true. My bank account reminded me daily.

Pope interrupted Ramsey with a snap, lasering his eyes into mine. "You delivered pizzas, right? Quite successfully, if rumor serves me correctly."

I became an overnight phenom in the delivery business when I got shot in an alley on live TV only to run inside Ugly Pizza to be shoved into a walk-in freezer by a killer. I'd been left to die amongst pepperoni and sausage. Bad day. I detected a hint of sarcasm.

He sighed when Ramsey and I didn't laugh. "If you need some extra money, pick up some detail work."

Before I could speak, Ramsey spoke for me. "Try college football, Walker," he joked sarcastically, a reference obviously to my boyfriend. "If you're lucky, you will get felt up in the crowd and maybe get a contact high from the weed."

"Hard to pass up a winning combo like that," I said breezily.

Sergeant Pope closed his eyes in prayer and opened them after about ten seconds. He reached down into an open side drawer of his desk, removing a gigantic sized bottle of Tums, fruit flavor. Tossing a handful in his mouth, he chewed and answered, "Then find something else. You're both dismissed."

I didn't want to do a mall or theater gig, and all the great venues were already taken by department veterans. That left my choices to guarding bodies at the morgue or directing traffic at college sporting events. Believe it or not, my first choice would be the morgue. At least they wouldn't be a-holes.

Ramsey and I threw Sergeant Pope a peace sign on exit, an inside joke of an Ugly Pizza customer of mine having quite literally peace'd-out when he was on his deathbed.



"Don't let Sergeant Pope get to you," Ramsey murmured.

Glancing out over the dash, I focused on the double yellow lines, realizing that would be next to impossible. "He's my boss. Of course, he gets to me."

"He's just extra tough on you because of the respect he has for Captain Taylor."

Perhaps or perhaps I reminded him of someone who was her own worst enemy. An accusation I'd heard before.

I took a drink of flat Coke between the console. As soon as I deposited the cup back in the holder, Ramsey picked it up and finished it off. There were a lot of things I wouldn't tolerate in life. Sharing a Coke was one of them, but with Ramsey, it was different. We did the ride or die thing daily. Already, I didn't know where he began and I ended.

"I think he likes you more than anyone," he added. "Besides, it's just his way."

Wind had picked up, knocking up against the side of the car in a whooshing hiss, reminding us Los Angeles wasn't the

perfect, sunny city at all times. It was flawed, just like everything else.

A few hours later, Ramsey and I finished our shift by taking a call off Santa Monica Boulevard. Santa Monica B was home to 10-7, a sports bar many law enforcement officers, first-responders, and ex-military frequented when they were off duty.

Out of service in police code, 10-7 was what an officer called into Dispatch if he or she was taking a report, meal break, visiting the restroom, etcetera. The owner of the bar, Axel Grey, was retired LAPD, and his hamburgers were so famous, many on patrol would have burgers delivered to them just so they could eat them in their cars. With famous patrons and decorated officers burnishing the walls, 10-7 was a little less than a sports bar and a little more than that famous bar on *Cheers*. You knew everyone's name, where they worked, who they worked for, whether they were good at it, and whether they deserved to be promoted or fired. And most importantly, who they had or were currently shacking up with.

One thing I'd learned? Police officers appreciated good gossip. It gave them something to talk about when they were cloistered away in their automobiles.

The call was regarding J.B. Hughes. Hughes was an EDP—what we in law enforcement referred to as an emotionally disturbed person. Ex-military, he was a regular fixture at 10-7 where he sat on a stool right outside the womens' restroom. His idea of a good time was to do the voyeur thing and touch his privates when women went inside and out. Did he normally do this? No. It happened after six beers wherein he would eventually break out into song. People felt sorry for Hughes, so when he got to that point, he was usually kicked out of the pub, and a unit would take him home.

By the sound of the call that came in, Hughes had his days and nights mixed up, showing up for lunch several hours early. He currently was on the sidewalk, talking to the air.

Ramsey and I exited our shop, approaching slowly. When officers approached someone they felt to be unstable, we kept our hands on our hips—closest to our guns and tasers. It was Ramsey’s turn to take the lead, but I drew the short straw because Hughes had developed a soft spot for me. Besides the fact he regularly liked to play touchy-feely, Hughes was a rocking-chair-in-front-of-Cracker-Barrel type of guy. Problem was, there didn’t have to be a Cracker Barrel on this side of the western seaboard. He had a rocker in the back of his beater van, and if he wanted to drop it in the middle of I-5, he would—and did. I’d pulled him off a busy street last week while I was off duty.

“Hey, Hughes. It’s Officer Walker,” I said. “What has you in the middle of the street?”

Hughes was about twenty pounds underweight with a graying beard and black hair falling past his shoulders. His jeans fell far below his waist, and his black sneakers were full of holes. It was doubtful he’d had a bath in the last decade.

“I’m closing the portal to Hell,” he said.

That was a new one, but I found my eyes darting around anyway. “The portal to Hell? I didn’t know it was open.”

“Opened up right around five a.m., and the guys in the bar don’t seem to care.”

The bar had been closed for hours—God only knew how long he’d been trying to send Satan back to his homeland.

“If we help you close it, will you let Officer Ramsey and I drive you home?” I asked.

“Do you pray?” he asked me.

“I attempt it.”

Hughes gazed heavenward. “You need to pray, Walker. Everyone needs to pray. Do you see them?” he asked. He glanced around wide-eyed, and I had to admit, I began to worry it was the end of the world, and I might wind up on the wrong side of eternity. An old woman on the other side of the street

felt the same. She had a crucifix in her hand, looking at the same nothingness I was staring at.

I took a tentative step closer to Hughes as Ramsey approached him from behind. “You need to eat better,” I said. “When you don’t eat right, these weird things happen to you.”

Hughes puffed his chest out. “I don’t need food. Superheroes don’t need food.”

It felt like I was swinging at a fastball. “Sure they do. God’s chosen need food more than anyone.”

Hughes lifted one dirty, bushy brow. “They didn’t tell me that in superhero school. They barely covered closing portals.”

I was pretty sure Hughes was off his meds. How else could you explain wanting to close the portal to Hell? Problem was, he had post-traumatic stress disorder to boot. One too many tours in war-torn countries had fried him. Add on some alcohol, and it always went downhill fast.

I tossed up a few prayers and pressed against some imaginary force field Hughes placed my hands on. Apparently, it worked after a few seconds of pushing, according to the look of triumph on his face. After we saved the world, Ramsey and I brought Hughes to the squad car, steering him into the backseat.

Hughes’ glassy eyes stared into mine, satisfied we’d done our jobs.

“Don’t worry about what I eat, Officer Walker. I get more than my share of protein. A beer is like seven pieces of bread.”

“Then that’s your problem,” I said. “You need to balance out all those carbs with some protein and vegetables. When was the last time you had a decent meal?”

“Chick-fil-A. Two days ago. That’s like a Jesus place, you know? Jesus likes chicken.” He paused. “But he doesn’t like this chicken sandwich war going on. Do you know you guys are my best friends?”

I legit got a little misty because that was probably true—

maybe even true about the chicken. Ramsey closed Hughes inside, and in two beats, he joined me in the front seat, him behind the wheel. “Would you like us to get you some breakfast?” he asked Hughes, turning around to face him. “Then we’ll take you home so you can get in your rocking chair and rest up. Closing the portal to Hell can really take it out of a man.”

At the mention of food, Hughes leaned forward, gagged twice, and emptied his stomach all over the back of the squad car.

CHAPTER 3

PUKE PATROL

“I can’t believe you puked in our shop, Hughes,” Ramsey hissed.

“Lighten up, Francis,” I muttered. I used to block out most profanity. Now I heard it so much that my mind couldn’t keep up.

“Who’s Francis?” Hughes asked.

“Jesus, it’s just an idiom,” Ramsey muttered.

“Is Francis a friend of Jesus?” Hughes added.

Ramsey blew out a curse.

I slid my eyes to Ramsey. “Idioms and metaphors are lost on Hughes. Keep it simple.”

“That’s right,” Hughes agreed. “I need simple.”

Here was the thing about a squad car. We had to deal with the stench of the suspects we pulled in for the day. At any given time, our car could have the tangy smell of blood or the sweaty desperation of a junkie looking for the next fix. Maybe even industrial disinfectant that sometimes gave me an asthma attack even though I didn’t have breathing problems. Even prayers of desperation had a scent, but right then, it was vomit. Where we’d picked up Hughes for disorderly conduct and planned to drop him off at his house to sleep it off, his puke

changed things. His choice right then was to get booked because we couldn't leave him on his front porch for his kids to find him. Well, we could, but I had a soft spot for his kids. It wasn't their crime to endure if their dad occasionally did dumbass things.

We pulled into the station a little before seven a.m. While Ramsey dragged Hughes off to the holding tank, I got behind the wheel and drove our cruiser to the garage. The department contracted out a biohazard team to clean up vehicles for a fee, so we normally didn't have to touch the stuff. Since Hughes's vomit was mostly fluid and what smelled like pure grain alcohol, I got a jumpstart on the disinfection because the germaphobe in me couldn't let it wait. Parking the car right above a drain in the floor, I grabbed the hose from the wall, opened both back doors, and let her rip. After five minutes of labor, I quit hoping for a miracle and considered it success when the last of the vomit and what looked like beer nuts went down the drain. I glanced around the garage as boisterous, teasing laughter could be heard from all four corners. Oftentimes, I'd been the butt of jokes in high school. Things weren't much different in Los Angeles.

Douchebag levels had hit critical mass.

Holding my fist up, I shook it in their direction. Thing was, my middle finger wouldn't cooperate and stayed straight up because I'd broken it, and it hadn't healed right. The d-bags could interpret that however they wanted. I honestly didn't care.

Detective Nathaniel Mayfield came up to stand beside me, throwing his arm around my shoulder. "Heard you and Ramsey closed the portal to Hell."

"We did. Unfortunately, it didn't suck you in before it closed."

Mayfield threw his head back and laughed. After I redundantly recounted what I knew Ramsey had probably told the

world, Detective Mayfield took the hose from my hand and wrapped it around the hook on the wall. As a rookie, I was a low woman on the totem pole, which was why I'd landed night shift work. Mayfield worked zombie hours because he'd landed as the top bullet of someone's sh*tlist when a case went sideways ten years earlier. He'd basically been put out to pasture, and his findings and reports were turned over to the A-team at the end of his shift for them to solve—and subsequently get all the glory during daylight hours.

About my height, Mayfield was black with dark brown, graying hair and eyes that held a lot of turmoil—turmoil that came from seeing one too many murder scenes. His act of chivalry was dead though. Puke patrol would do that to a girl.

Striding back into the station, I made myself a jumbo cup of coffee and readied myself mentally to do the rest of my paperwork. For police officers, the goal was to be on the street. As a result, reports were done while sitting in the car on our MDT (mobile data terminal) or at the end of the shift if we were diverted to another call, turning a twelve-hour workday into thirteen if an officer was deficient in time management skills.

I found my favorite spot on the edge of the detectives' station right outside the Robbery-Homicide and Gang and Narcotics Divisions. Further back was vice. I liked being within earshot of the suits, hearing how they secured scenes, their thought processes, who they had on their radar and who they considered low level and a big player on the street.

Firing up a computer—reports were digital—I cracked my neck and rolled my shoulders around. After I'd realigned my spine, I started with Louie Dickerson and his association to Fat Tony. Ramsey and I divided up who would write the official report on each call. I could type fast, starting with giving the step by step of what Ramsey and I had encountered. When finished, I then provided an officer's statement, which was more detailed. Here was where I occasionally got into hot water. I

would give my opinion on someone's guilt or innocence and how they struck me as an individual—e.g., they talked a lot, or talked too little, had shifty eyes, or made lewd comments about mine or even Ramsey's body. Or police officers in general. Once, a report of mine was read at roll call, garnering several laughs because of the initialisms I used—DF, MAS, CB, or NHAA—defined as dumb f*ck, mean as sh*t, conveniently blind, and no help at all. I shrugged off any discomfort. Maybe it would help the detective assigned to the case if a felony was committed.

While Louie was on my mind, I made a quick field information card, or FIC, on him. FIC's were normally scrawled on index cards, documenting who officers contacted, where and when. We made them and left them in our glove compartment, so if a crime occurred in that location, we could run reference on who was in that area and question them to see if they'd noticed anything. Louie was from Vegas, but I made one anyway just to keep track of Fat Tony's couriers.

As I finished up report number five, Officer Jon Bradshaw—my friend from Cincinnati who'd moved to LA with me, chasing the same dream—brought in his first arrest. He had somehow scored a morning shift, despite being a rookie—the butthead.

From one glance at the suspect, it was apparent he was a member of Slavic Power, an international, organized crime-group of degenerates who functioned more like the mob than your traditional gangbangers. Other than the normal murder, assault, and robbery, SP as their street named called them, was known for being in the firearms business.

Grumpy, my nickname for Bradshaw, was of stocky build and about an inch taller than me with a scar in his eyebrow from head-butting one of our friends in high school. Taking the baldheaded tattooed man to booking, he then came back and stood in front of my desk, readying to hit the streets.

“Jesus, people are crazy,” he said, “and I’ve only been on the clock for forty-five minutes. The asshole I just hauled in had enough guns in the back of his van to underwrite World War III.” He smiled or what resembled a smile on his normally stoic face. “I heard you dragged in an interesting case.”

I unbuttoned the top button of my shirt and loosened my tie propping my ugly cop shoes on the seat in front of me, trying to relax. “Yeah,” I said. “It was J.B. Hughes. We picked him up outside 10-7 where he was closing the portal to Hell.”

“Are we mere mortals safe?”

“Best I can tell, unless a few demons snuck out.”

Grumpy yanked the bun on my head that had become lopsided during the portal closing. “Also heard some suspect tried to shoot you on your lunch break.”

One thing about Grumpy, he was good at gleaning the station gossip. “That would also be correct.”

“And?” he pushed.

I erased a pencil smear on the paper before I typed them into the database. No one would ever see my notes, but I kept them for myself in case I would ever be called to testify on a specific incident. I gave Grumpy a grin. “I burned him with his own lighter.”

“Appreciate the improv. So Fat Tony sent him?”

I’d told Grumpy about Fat Tony right after I won the four grand. Evidently, Grumpy’s snitch got the story straight.

“That’s the official story, and it sucks.”

“Look on the bright side. Today is supposed to be rainy. Ergo, it will suck for everybody. Maybe even Fat Tony.”

“Good point. I’m being too negative about the whole thing.”

Grumpy’s and my barometer of what constituted a good day had never really jived with the rest of the world. I’d witnessed my mother’s death, and Grumpy had six brothers who’d spent more time behind bars than enjoying the freedom American’s innately had. Grumpy came from a long

line of drug addicts, slackers, and pharmacologists of the illegal drug kind. And as a result, many in our hometown wrote him off before they ever gave him a chance. The longer I was in police work, the more I realized God put people like Grumpy on Earth to remind the masses to not always prejudge.

Coming from a household of instability, Grumpy had turned into quite an impressive negotiator. That would translate into good boyfriend material if he ever found the perfect catch. Unfortunately, I could tell he had just left Ivy Morrison's apartment because I smelled her perfume on his shirt. That narcissistic beeyotch occasionally wore Can Can by Paris Hilton. And God knew Grumpy *did did*.

When I made an exaggerated sniffing sound, he gave me a rarely seen smile. Fate itself had made my transition to LA a little less comfortable than I would've liked. My arch nemesis, Ivy, decided to attend college at UCLA—hoping to find cinematic stardom. After a nuclear breakup and too many public meltdowns to count, she and her longtime boyfriend broke up not long after graduation, and let's just say she didn't put herself on the shelf for long...Grumpy was the rebound.

Again...and again...and again.

While she dated married men in between.

After I sent my reports to Watch Command, I made my way to my 4Runner. Grumpy fell in line behind me and snagged my arm, giving me a side hug. We'd traveled all the way from Cincinnati together in my car. A person learned a lot of things about someone when you traveled across the country together—the biggest being that men didn't flinch at breaking wind in front of an audience as much as women did.

"Staying at Paddy's?" I asked, referring to the room he rented from one of our mentors.

"When my shift's over," he murmured.

I grabbed his gaze and unleashed the rubber band holding

my bun in place, shaking out my hair. “You know you’re a slut,” I joked. And Ivy was too, but I didn’t say it.

Grumpy gave me that brain-dead look—the face a man gave the world when he couldn’t see his significant other’s faults. My altruistic desire to land him a date worthy of him would be the end of me before Ramsey’s afternoon delights. As if the universe heard my thoughts, right then Officer Holland Hemming strode past, and if there was any question whether Grumpy was totally committed, I had my answer.

He groaned...and ran his tongue over his upper lip.

My brain began singing Taylor Swift songs.

Hemming was hotter than the Earth’s inner core and the type that made your eyes pop into a holy crap. Her hair was red. Eyes an aquamarine-blue. She graduated from the academy with us, the second female graduate behind yours truly. She was fast...I was faster. She was smart...I was smarter. But she had something I didn’t have: big boobs. Rolling with men 24/7, I’d learned most appreciated a great set of mammary glands.

Grumpy, I’d discovered, was a boob man—probably mommy issues if I wanted to go the Freudian route, which meant he’d weaned too soon.

“Hey, Hemming,” I said.

Hemming slowed her gait, waving big. “Hey. Sorry, I gotta roll. I was just called in to sub for Benton. His wife just went into labor. And in case you’re wondering, I’ve had about twelve hours of sleep in two days. I can’t get used to working nights.”

The transition hadn’t been difficult for me since I was a night delivery driver, but my fellow rookies were struggling with acclimating to the schedule. No one cared if we liked our schedules though—we were rookies. We were barely one notch above the bed bug. “Caffeine it up,” I told her. “Works for me.”

She held up a white YETI full of what I assumed was coffee as she waved over her shoulder. “Got it covered. See you later, Jester,” she said to me. “You, too, Bradshaw.”

Only a handful knew of my alter ego, Jester. As Jester, I'd found murderers, kidnappers, and personal identity thieves. I'd helped a classmate prove his girlfriend was a cheat and rubbed shoulders with a sociopath who tried to use that name and frame me. Jester's name was even on a 911 transcript somewhere in Cyberland when I called in a school shooter sophomore year. That transcript had surprisingly never been made public...shocking in a world that loved the gory details. Out in LA, Grumpy let it slip that my nickname was Jester. As a result, everyone on the force had begun to call me their favorite clown. I wasn't sure that was good, but then again, there were a lot of things that weren't good.

Grumpy watched Hemming's rear end sway all the way into the precinct. A good conversation with him was two words instead of one, but if he ever longed to be transparent, I was the one he confided the deep, dark secrets of his soul.

"She's got the best body," he muttered, "but I'm not a cheat."

He and Hemming dated for about a minute a couple of months ago during a break from Ivy, and he'd never gotten over it.

If I could dissolve into the ductwork, right then would be the optimum time. I made a mediocre attempt to talk to Grumpy about his choice in women. "Did you ever think Ivy might not be America's best?"

He pursed his lips. "Thanks for judging, Officer Judgypants. And just so you know, Ivy goes to church now. She's thinking about joining the Church to the Stars."

Let me play Devil's Advocate. The Church to the Stars just might be a cult. Members were required to live in a huge egalitarian gated community complete with guard dogs and nightly curfews. The church encouraged new converts to leave everyone behind who didn't share in their newfound faith. Although I wouldn't consider myself anyone's moral compass, I didn't understand the secrecy behind a religion that was

supposed to save people from themselves. And the biggest coup de grâce? Members signed over nearly one hundred percent of their weekly paychecks all in the name of doing God's work. I believed in benevolence—and what many Christians referred to as a tithe check—but not when your so-called safe haven threatened to kick you out of the community if you didn't comply.

“And you believe they're all about Jesus?” I asked.

His brows furrowed into a frown. “Aren't all churches?”

I gave him my patented you're-an-idiot face. Other than Ivy being a textbook narcissist, the real screw-job was that Grumpy hung on her every word. “You shouldn't have to buy God, Grumpy. Even I know that. And when you do, it's a cult.”

He didn't say anything, but I was hoping I'd at least sown a seed of doubt. I hit him up with a goodbye and thumbed the key fob on my pearl-white 4Runner with tan leather seats. My grandfather had purchased it for my graduation, and my father had requested the color be white because insurance on white vehicles was cheaper since they were more visible on the road. I wasn't sure that statement held weight in LA. All I knew was I was dirt-poor, only eating three squares because I lived with my boyfriend's grandparents and two meals a day were usually on them. Not exactly a lot to be proud of, but God help me, a girl had to start somewhere.

As predicted, traffic was straight out of the mouth of Hades as soon as I hit the interstate. I sucked in a big breath of air and morphed into that Randy Newman song “I Love LA” anyway.

Well, most days...but definitely not during morning rush hour.

CHAPTER 4

GOD'S HAND

My mother was murdered when I was nine. Working through that grief was an everyday process—helped along by love, prayer, and a daily prescription from my local pharmacist. When the medicine didn't exactly agree with me, I went solo and learned to compartmentalize the things that bothered me. Or better yet, I tried. Having been diagnosed as ADHD before her death, my brain oftentimes couldn't find the off switch anyway, and no amount of compartmentalizing in the world could calm the nervous tics or tendency to feel caged in.

That being said, my tendency to be a verb sometimes came with a cost because as an officer I did one thing—watch people all day, every day...inside the darn squad car. Sometimes I got to act on my hunches when people did reckless things. Others, I had to punch out and realize that bad people got away, and I didn't get to close out a case. As a police officer, that left a hollow feeling in the center of my chest, especially as I saw the ripple effect of someone's choices. How those choices didn't just affect them but those around them. Their loved ones. Their enemies. The people in their neighborhood.

Barely a month in, there were days I felt defeated...like I

didn't do enough for the people of my community. And like always, it didn't take a shrink to tell me I was still trying to save the mother who died right before my eyes.

Living with Lincoln and Alexandra Taylor had been a blessing in disguise—a blessing because she was a phenomenal cook (her desserts could make you see Jesus) and a blessing because Lincoln was the captain of the West LA Division. He'd taught me patience—or at least the most patience an ADHD person like me could ever achieve.

“Are you on your way home, engoni?” Alexandra asked when I answered her call en route.

Engoni was Greek for granddaughter. Alexandra obviously had high hopes for the longevity of mine and Dylan's relationship. Didn't we all. “Yeah. Long day,” I told her. “I got puked on.”

“Ah, police work can be very challenging.” Even at her age, her voice was sultry and seductive. The woman aged like a fine wine.

“Don't I know it. Are you at the shop?”

“I'm taking some bougatsa out of the oven. Food is in the refrigerator for when you wake up. Pixie and I will see you later.”

Alexandra worked every day at her bakery, Baptiste's Bakery, in WeHo. It had this cute little pink awning over the door with wall-to-wall glass cases inside she couldn't keep stocked with baked goods. What many didn't know was that when Lincoln worked in vice, it had served as command central for the undercovers in his unit. According to Alexandra, Lincoln's old unit still dropped by weekly for free food and private conversation. Sometimes, Lincoln joined them. Others, he was behind his desk, serving as a captain until retirement. I'd hung with his vice unit while in high school and helped them bring down a baddie named Crash Falcon. Lincoln had an informant then who ratted out Falcon's every move—turned

out it was a teenager named Pixie who worked for Alexandra, and her father was on Falcon's payroll.

When Pixie, real name Penelope, became orphaned, Lincoln and Alexandra adopted her.

Pixie had been posing as someone younger than her, but in reality was several years older. She had just graduated high school and was taking a gap year to find herself, working with Alexandra. Pixie, though, hadn't found anything, regularly walking her wild side on the weekends. She'd recently been caught sneaking into Compton to pursue a budding romance with a Compton King—gangbangers who'd rather shoot first and ask questions later. When I questioned her about the budding romance, she thankfully decided to pull the plug.

Fifty minutes later, I pulled into their neighborhood in Bel Air. Lincoln and Alexandra had previously lived in a modest LA community, but a few years back, their wildly successful son and daughter—Colton was a VP running the security department at a cosmetics company, and Willow was a super model—gifted them with an eight-figure dream home in a gated community. The two-story home was Mediterranean style and blended ultramodern details like a voice-command kitchen with a dramatic yet timeless design. It consisted of six bedrooms, a library, and media room—the design spotlighting majestic canyon views. A sweeping staircase sat in the middle of the open space, and structural columns were disbursed throughout, reminding me of a page out of *Architectural Digest*. The upgrade had been difficult for Lincoln and Alexandra to wrap their heads around. Me too, but it was nice not to be slumming in a one-bedroom roach motel.

Punching my thumb on the garage door opener on my sun visor, I pulled inside once given the all-clear and then activated the door into the down position. Popping my car door wide, I grabbed my purse with one hand and removed my ugly cop shoes and socks with the other. I didn't want to track Hughes'

vomit inside. Leaving them outside to air out, like every day, once I twisted the doorknob, my dog, Lucky, greeted me. A fawn-colored boxer, he was a present from Dylan when I relocated to Los Angeles. He had a cropped tail and ears and a white stripe down the center of his black face. Four white socks covered his feet, and a white number seven marked his chest. I was one of those annoying pet people who treated their animal like a child.

“Hey, buddy,” I said, squatting down and patting him on the head. “Bad night. I got puked on.”

Lucky wagged his stumpy tail and tilted his head to the side, deciphering what puke was. Dumping my purse on the countertop, I grabbed a doggie treat from a cookie jar and pitched it in his direction right as Dylan’s grandfather entered the room. He should’ve been braving traffic on his way to work. Instead, he stood in front of me, wanting a rundown of my shift. Lincoln Taylor could’ve already retired but couldn’t seem to permanently clock out.

Legendary for eating a lot of lead and still with a working heartbeat, Lincoln was a striking man at six two or so with gray-ing-brown hair and eyes the color of a rich cup of espresso. I’d been with him on a murder scene, and he’d been as imposing as the man who operated the guillotine. But despite being in full navy uniform having two silver bars on his collar that told the world he was a captain, in his kitchen, he was merely my boyfriend’s grandfather. All cuddly and full of concern.

He dragged me into a hug and kissed me on the forehead, pulling back to communicate eyes only. “You heard,” I said, referring to Fat Tony. I dumbly giggled.

Lincoln blew out a weary breath. “I heard.”

“Yeah, well, Fat Tony apparently wants to take a bite out of Darcy Walker, but it’s not gonna happen.”

Lincoln’s eyes burned into mine while he maintained his grip on my shoulders. “I’ve already spoken to the District Attor-

ney's office. Dickerson is going to be warming a cell for a while. His bail will more than likely be set high because you are a police officer." He hesitated, his eyes boring into mine. "Pope has someone on this?"

I backed out of his arms, loosening my tie even more. "Does he have a car on me? I don't know," I offered, adding a shrug, "but he said he would take care of it."

"Then he'll do it," Lincoln promised. "But dear, I need you to let *him* take care of it."

He knew my tendency to scratch that itch I had to occasionally go Nancy Drew.

I would try—I didn't exactly want to bulldoze my career or get written up for insubordination.

Lincoln strode around me and flipped the switch on the coffee maker, giving it a few seconds to wake up. Quickly following was a click, hiss, and soothing drip. "So I hear you also got introduced to the vomit of J.B. Hughes," he said over his shoulder.

Lincoln's list of informants was so long it could probably stretch across the continental U. S.

I yawned, placing my hand over my mouth. "Yeah. He's sleeping it off in jail."

Lincoln chuckled, and his two dimples made an appearance. After some chitchat while his travel mug filled up, I hugged him goodbye and trudged up the stairs. Once in my room, I removed my badge and ripped the tie from my neck, throwing my uniform into the laundry hamper. Police uniforms were a polyester/rayon blend that recommended dry cleaning. I had three uniforms, but since I couldn't afford a regular dry-cleaning bill, I washed them in cold water and hung them up immediately. I planned to take them to the dry cleaners periodically just to keep the seams intact. After paying my rent, I saved most of my paycheck and lived off a budget. As a result, my trips to Target were few and far

between, and eating out was something I did once, maybe twice a week. I even doubled-up on makeup wipes, using some of them twice.

Adulthood is hard...

After I stepped into a zebra onesie and zipped it up, I removed my contacts, sent a quick I-didn't-die text to my father and Dylan, and crawled into bed—calling it quits for a few hours.



“You’re safe,” Dylan said for the umpteenth time.

“And Pope is taking care of it,” my father, Murphy, added.

I hadn’t relished telling either of them and thought a three-way call could kill two birds with one stone.

Fat Louie was the subject of a massive dragnet, a BOLO being placed on him and his organization as of this morning. Las Vegas police were even involved, and Ramsey and I had basically been told to keep our eyes open, even when we were asleep.

“So he says,” I told them. “Thank God Louie was not a successful kidnapper, but can I confess the whole thing makes me want to bloodhound Fat Tony myself? I want a face-to-face, just so I can haul his fat butt to jail.”

Both were quiet for a while, my words turning over in their minds like taffy on a stretching machine—shouting, I surmised, that I was barely thirty-days in and still not satisfied. As a police officer, my urges were definitely somewhat corralled, but Fat Tony made that still, small voice inside me scream I needed to take care of my enemies myself.

“I get that,” Dylan finally said in a rich baritone voice. “I’m going to pray God gives you something to occupy you in the meantime that you will enjoy.”

“Prayer’s a given,” my father grunted, “but me personally?”

I'm going to pray Tony Falco chokes on a chicken wing and winds up in Hell.”

Disconnecting, I glanced around the room decorated like a page right out of Joss & Main. Twice the size of my bedroom back home, it was painted gray and white, minimalist and modern in design with a skylight that lit up the room without flipping on a lamp. A white desk sat in a corner along with a comfy, white leather couch Lucky crashed on daily for a nap. A flatscreen TV hung on the wall that had prime viewing from all angles, and underneath it was a beanbag large enough for two people.

Dylan and I had given that beanbag a workout last time he visited. I sighed at the sweaty memory and keyed in the number to make a daily video call to Kellan Sutherland, known in the Cincinnati, Ohio, organized crime syndicate as Jaws.

We'd first become acquainted my sophomore year in high school. How did I develop a relationship with someone in the mob?

It was simple. He had something I needed.

Jaws was formerly in a gang called River City Smugglers, and I'd personally reached out to RCS through a friend to gather street noise on two other gangs in Cincinnati. Jaws had not been the leader of RCS, but they dissolved when their leader was assassinated, Jaws continued with the life, building his own empire.

When Jaws answered that phone call, he honored my request and provided the names of who was in a gang at my school at warp speed. In vintage Jaws fashion, he was instrumental in saving my life when one of those people attempted to kill me.

Why, you might say, would someone in organized crime even take a high schooler seriously? Not known to me until later, Jaws and his brother had some sort of relationship with my late mother and aunt. When he heard my name—having a

light bulb moment of his connection with my family—our friendship was formed.

Sitting up in bed, I adjusted my blankets and listened to the FaceTime trill thingy, waiting for him to answer. At first, we'd only had interactions via telephone. Later, we upgraded to a few face-to-face chats, and since I'd moved out West, we had daily telephone or FaceTime sessions. Whatever job or responsibilities Jaws held in his organization, he purposely rearranged his schedule, so we could talk about what I'd experienced the night before. Where we'd previously chatted after my afternoon run, we now normally spoke while I drove home at the butt-crack of dawn—somewhere between seven-thirty and eight-thirty a.m.

Something out of the ordinary was going down in his world because I'd received a text that he couldn't speak to me at the normal time and to phone later.

When Jaws answered, my eyebrows climbed. He was in a bathroom, surrounded by expensive dark marble accents. I saw his naked chest, full of an impressive set of muscles that belonged on a Roman statue. Jaws had the appeal of a fallen angel, and seeing him partially naked reminded me how much I liked to sin.

He scrubbed at his wet, dark brown hair with a towel. "Hello, Jester," he murmured underneath the thick, white cloth.

Jaws was the first person I'd test-driven my alter ego's name of Jester.

I lived my life believing there were degrees of evil. Robbery wasn't as bad as shoplifting. Voyeurism wasn't as bad as rape. Insider trading wasn't as bad as Ponzi schemes. Terroristic threatening wasn't as bad as torture. Assault wasn't as bad as murder. That was the way I justified my relationship with Jaws. I suspicioned he had first-hand knowledge of all those scenarios (except rape...women disrobed for him of their own accord). Case in point? I saw the reflection of some dingbat in

the mirror. She was thin, brunette, and looked like she existed on a diet staple of salad and Fiji water.

“Jester?” he murmured again when I went speechless. He tossed the white towel somewhere offscreen and found my eyes. His whiskey-colored gaze narrowed, full of concern. “You okay, babe?”

I fumbled around with the black Ray-Ban eyeglasses on my nose. “Just soaking up the scenery,” I mumbled. He was such a whore.

Jaws had introduced a woman to me named Bianca Holt a few months back. She was the first and only woman he’d given a name, although I’d seen many different faces and voices of women over the years. Apparently, that relationship imploded, just like his morals.

“Baby?” I heard.

Her voice was too sweet, and she had that lights-are-on, but-no-one’s-home thing going on in her eyes. Hey, it was Jaws’ business.

Jaws never kissed her goodbye, but he whispered something in her direction, and she slinked out of the room in a pink silk robe. Mercy, she was dressed like Barbie. That should be criminal.

Once we were alone, I told Jaws the events of my last shift. He carried his phone with him into a huge walk-in closet. Propping it up on a shelf, he opened a drawer, pulling a white T-shirt over his head. “You have to be kidding me,” was his response to Ramsey and me paying another little visit to the Garcias.

“One hundred percent true,” I told him. “Wouldn’t you think they’d figure out they aren’t good for one another?”

“There’s a reason the word masochism is in the dictionary, Jester. It has a huge following.”

“Business good?” I asked. God only knew what it entailed, but I wasn’t used to him rescheduling a call between us.

Jaws selected an expensive black shirt and slid one arm inside and then the other, buttoning it up. He should be winding down his day at the office, East Coast time. Maybe he'd pulled an all-nighter? "Yes, and busy," he said. "Anything else?"

Gazing out my window, I caught a glimpse of the remaining leaves on a gold medallion tree. The wind was so fierce they'd almost turned inside out, but somehow a vacant nest had hung on during the onslaught. "A guy named Fat Tony might have a wee bit of an unhealthy obsession with me."

Jaws halted the buttoning process, picking up his phone and looking me dead in the eyes. "Expound more on this Fat Tony character."

I reiterated that Fat Tony had sent Louie Dickerson to find me—leaving out the part about the use of force.

Jaws went back to buttoning up his shirt. "I'm concerned he sent an idiot to come look for you."

"You worry too much."

"And you worry too little. It's always a concern when someone has personnel at their disposal like Louie Dickerson to do his dirty work. That insinuates some level of organization."

"Fat Tony is Vegas mob."

Jaws dropped an F-bomb followed by the words *me* and *mother*.

While Jaws pulled on some pants out of eyesight, I gave him a play-by-play of how I'd met Fat Tony in the first place, bragging about winning four Gs in poker. It went left unsaid that Jaws would have a 10-20—or location—on Fat Tony for future reference.

Jaws was back at his sink. He braced his hands on the edge of it, hanging his head. "Four grand? I need a minute to process," he mumbled. "And maybe a shot of bourbon."

"Uh, I might not have a minute."

His head shot up. “Qualify,” he barked.

“Louie Dickerson tried to kidnap me. He attacked me in the squad car, but I burned him with the cigarette lighter that fell out of his pocket. So at least I got a little piece of him, which felt pretty darn good if I think about it.”

I high-fived the air. Jaws merely stared at my hand.

After a series of blinks, he then unloaded every curse word that was on the taboo list. “Is this a joke?” he hissed.

His words hit me like a shotgun blast to the chest. I breathed deeply, charging my lungs with a smell of lavender sleep spray I’d pumped onto my pillow to help me fall asleep faster.

“I want a little bit of payback, okay? A one-on-one where I can tell Fat Tony to take the L like a big boy and back off.”

Jaws stood straight up, crossing his arms over his chest. I’d seen that look in Pope’s office a few hours prior. “You’re a police officer. You’re supposed to know when to walk away, Jester. Did you tell your superiors?”

“No, I thought they might make me stand in the corner,” I said sarcastically. He rolled his eyes—something I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen him do. “Of course, I told them,” I admitted, “but I’ve never backed down from someone trying to take a bite out of my freedom.”

He cocked his head to the side, one eyebrow raised with his demeanor doing a complete-180. “You have rules now,” he said calmly.

“Yeah, well there’s that.”

“And you don’t do rules.”

He made it sound so dirty. “Are you going to help me or not?” I asked. My irritation was growing by leaps and bounds. I pulled the zebra hood of my onesie over my head, defiant like a teenager out of control.

Jaws left the bathroom and returned with a laptop. I heard a few keystrokes. While he typed around on whatever his

personal databank was, I slid out of bed and strode downstairs to get a bottled water, taking my phone with me. Alexandra had not only left me a meal in the refrigerator, she had written a note that said fresh cookies were in the cookie jar that didn't contain Lucky's treats. Lifting the lid, I snagged a white chocolate and macadamia nut cookie for breakfast and padded back upstairs.

"Babe, I don't like what I'm reading here," he said. Jaws found a rap sheet and FBI file on Antonio "Fat Tony" Falco that included money laundering in strip clubs, laundromats, and loansharking. What exactly was laundering? Fat Tony would obtain revenue from some source illegally and then attempt to clean it up by claiming his laundromat did more business than it actually did. With regard to strip clubs? The same principle applied, but some of the females actually prostituted themselves. Stripping was legal. Prostitution was not. And Fat Tony, or those in his employ, would broker those sorts of liaisons.

Stand-up guy.

I channeled my inner-glass-half-full persona. "That's not so bad, I guess. It's not like he's selling weapons-grade plutonium."

Jaws grabbed my eyes. "Right," he snarled sarcastically, "because that's a million times worse than sending someone to kidnap a female. Did you forget what you did for eighty fucking days? If you forgot what it was like to be kidnapped, let me remind you how bad it was. Worst eighty days of my life."

I had an unscheduled eighty-day vacation in high school because of a man who'd decided to come back from the dead and wreak havoc on my father. Everyone thought him to be lounging next to Satan, but we crossed paths when I'd been doing recon for Jaws on a job he'd given me. It turned out he was the man obsessed with my mother who had killed her. The details of that abduction weren't much different from the situation with Fat Tony. Both had sent others in their employ to perform the deed.

Jaws had obviously never made peace with his involvement.

I, however, simply considered it a bullet on my personal dossier.

Balancing my cookie between my teeth, I unscrewed the lid on my water. “Fat Tony does not intimidate me,” I said between a bite of cookie and H₂O chaser.

“Listen to me,” he said with a stern, dramatic pause. “The file says he gets obsessed with young women. And those he doesn’t groom to become strippers wind up missing.”

I didn’t know that, but I had experience with that type of man. “Maybe it’s destiny?” I questioned. “If I wouldn’t have played Fat Tony, then I wouldn’t have won. And if I wouldn’t have won, then Fat Tony wouldn’t have come after me. And if Fat Tony wouldn’t have sent Louie, then I wouldn’t have found out he wanted to kidnap me. Plus, Dylan said a prayer for me about fifteen minutes ago that God would send me something I would enjoy. The way I see it? Maybe it’s all divine, so don’t worry.”

Jaws pinched the bridge of his nose. “I can see God’s Hand in the whole thing,” he quipped. “Jester?” he added. “It’s hard for me to take you seriously with a zebra head framing your face. Babe, in many ways you are still a child. Carry that gun with you at all times, understood?”

Jaws had phoned wanting to know what gift he could send to commemorate the earning of my please-shoot-at-me certificate in October. Problem was, I wasn’t the type of girl who made Pinterest vision boards of her dream clothes or wedding. I was the type who squealed when someone bought me a new handgun. Which was exactly what Jaws had done when I graduated. It was a sleek Sig Sauer P365 micro-compact that shot 9mm Luger. He’d named her Reason, perfect for concealed carry.

Why was it the perfect gift? It had no serial number.

CHAPTER 5

BUMP & RUN

A 911 call came over the radio, reporting a bump-and-run on Rockingham Avenue at four a.m.-ish the next shift, early Friday morning. A bump-and-run was a vehicle theft, performed when a car idled at a light or stop sign. The automobile behind would bump the car, and when the driver who'd been hit exited to inspect for damages and/or exchange insurance information, an accomplice would jump in the car the victim left unattended and speed away. The accomplice was usually in the passenger seat of the auto that had done the bumping, and then both would drive off with both vehicles, leaving the victim standing with one less car and a whole lot of headache.

When citizens phoned 911, their phone number determined which call center (or Dispatch) received the call for assistance. Once the call was received, the trained staff at Dispatch routed to the appropriate first responder whether that be police, fire, or EMS (emergency medical services) after a series of scripted questions. The call was then placed in the system by priority and dispatched to the next available unit. Our job as police officers was to have the frequency on our two-way Motorola radios or rover (meaning Remote Out of Vehicle Emergency

Response) turned to whatever precinct we belonged to, so we could accept a call.

A bump-and-run where there were no injuries was routed to police officers.

Ramsey and I were close by, so I spoke into the Motorola strapped over my left shoulder, telling Dispatch we would be the responding patrol unit.

Flipping on the flashers with accompanying siren, Ramsey said his usual once we were en route. "Let's crash the net, Walker," which was hockey lingo for going full speed to the net to find a rebound or loose puck.

Ramsey and I rolled up on a striking, leggy brunette ten minutes later who appeared to be looking up and down the street for the Lamborghini she'd reported stolen. In Hollywood, tall, beautiful women were a dime a dozen. Thing was, I didn't recognize her, but a camera crew had already circled her and a man who was a movie star.

"Holy cow," I said to Ramsey as I slid my fingers around the door handle. "The paparazzi are out at this hour? Must be a celebrity."

Flashing bulbs were one thing I still had trouble getting accustomed to. Cameras were everywhere, especially if they had been following a celebrity and tried to get the money shot.

"Let's find out who the car belongs to," he said.

All LAPD vehicles were equipped with a mobile data terminal. It was a laptop that was locked in place. We could check if vehicles were stolen by running license plates through a national database. We could also run rap sheets or check for active warrants.

I typed the license plate into the system and got a hit back that the car belonged to Joshua L. Bradley.

I whistled. "Car belongs to Josh Bradley."

Ramsey slid the car into park. "Make sure to smile and say cheese."

Josh Bradley was the biggest romantic/action lead to hit the screen in the last decade. Bradley had taken a sabbatical of sorts in the last year. He went to Mecca and came back to Hollywood bound and determined to write an inspirational novel and make cheese...as if he needed more cash. Last I read, his latest movie alone had been a guaranteed eight figures just by showing up on set, and that didn't take into account the residuals once the film released.

Ramsey and I flip-flopped the lead on all our calls. When approaching someone on the street, one officer was *contact*, and the other was *cover*. The contact spoke first, and it was my turn to kick off the questioning.

According to Dispatch, Poppy Landers phoned in the call, and the woman in front of us looked like a Poppy. Her name was normal enough by LA standards, but her significant other—and I could tell by the way he was touching her—was an absolute smoke show...as in smokin' hot. Caucasian, Bradley was head and shoulders above the crowd, dressed in a gray T-shirt and shorts like he'd just exited the gym.

Onscreen, Bradley was a woman's dream: sensitive, attentive, and the type to help you wade through your problems and offer solutions. In reality, tabloids claimed he was barely contained savagery, with a temper more combustible than an active volcano. Just my two cents' worth? If it wasn't a mere personality trait, in Hollywood, that could mean a couple of things—too much blow, alcohol, or too many prescription meds. I'd bank on the latter because Bradley was busted for DUI on New Year's Eve last year and blamed his failure of the field sobriety test on his Rx medication.

I was a below average student in high school, but interviewing victims came second nature. Some victims radiated a quiet shock. Others were angry from the get-go and tried to rally the masses to hang the one who'd wronged them by sundown. Unfortunately, and most usually, criminal acts didn't

solve themselves that easily. As an officer on the street, my job was to answer the call, establish an honest rapport, document the complaint, get a signature that an official charge was being reported, and then turn it into the appropriate detective to follow up on.

As soon as I stepped out of the car, I turned on my bodycam to document the call. Cameras flashed as we strode toward the vics, and by the sniffing of the woman who I assumed was Poppy, I knew instinctively she'd been driving when someone decided to reduce Bradley's auto inventory and take ownership of the Lambo. Bradley noticed her tears, pulling her into his arms and dropping a kiss on the top of her head. Poppy melted into him, swallowing down a yelp. From my limited time in Cali, I'd found the current trend in women was on the sliding scale of super skinny to super shapely. Poppy leaned toward the voluptuous end and had a lot of junk in her trunk, booty popping all over the place. When Bradley whispered encouragement, she swallowed down the tears and looked at Ramsey and me. God love her, she thought their relationship was forever, but Hollywood was full of disposable arm candy. Poppy could be around one week, but a good chance existed, she'd be replaced by the next...or sooner.

Early twentysomething, Poppy shot a sheepish smile my way, but then as most victims do, her gaze went straight to the man with the badge, thinking he had more clout—and super-powers—than the officer with ovaries.

Ramsey fell in behind me as I strode up to Poppy and Bradley.

“Hello, I'm Officer Walker,” I said. “I understand from the call that came in that someone stole your Lamborghini. Can you tell me exactly what happened?”

Poppy stared at my mouth like she couldn't comprehend the words that had come from it. Bradley, however, looked me square in the face and extended his hand for a firm shake.

The moment I shook his hand, there were more flashes of light with a pap asking Bradley for a full grin. He didn't give it to them, but he did tilt his body at a better angle.

After I gave them a dose of the *I'm sorrys*, I removed my PNB (police notebook) from my pocket, ready to take dictation. Officers carried small notebooks wherein we wrote dictation from the individual lodging the complaint—detailing the who, what, when, where, and why of it all. For me, each case was a page where I ended with a small diagram of the incident with vehicle positions, etcetera. I enjoyed the Picasso type of the job since my artistic skills were better than average.

Poppy reiterated what she'd told Dispatch. According to Poppy, she was driving alone and idling at the stoplight when her bumper was struck by the vehicle behind her. Devastated by “the damage to Joshy's car,” she'd exited the Lambo to talk to the driver who had hit her. By the time she'd made it to the driver's side door, the white Lambo was being driven off by the person who had been a passenger in the black Caddy SUV that had bumped her.

The black Caddy then peeled out—following the Lambo—leaving Poppy speechless.

“Did you get a look at the person who took your car?” I asked. “You know, the guy who'd been a passenger in the black Caddy?”

Poppy hugged herself, needing comfort beyond what Bradley provided. “Tall man,” she said, blinking big brown eyes in shock. “Like my Joshy. White. Skinny. Light brown hair.”

“What about the driver who bumped you?”

“She was pretty. Long, black hair. About your height. Round face. A little sketchy though.”

“How so?”

“She looked like she'd been up for days,” she explained. “She was nervous.”

Probably needed a hit of something, I thought. After Poppy

provided more details, I penciled a quick diagram of the intersection, adding the cars in the exact locations where Poppy claimed they had been.

“Where were you at this time, Mr. Bradley?” I asked him.

“At the gym. Poppy was on her way to pick me up. I can provide pics of that if you need it.”

“We’re going to need it,” Ramsey said.

While Bradley showed us images on his phone of him pumping iron in a local gym—and taking photographs with fans—he unleashed that million-dollar charm. “Hey, can I take a photo with you?” he asked me. Bradley pulled his T-shirt over his head, ready for a closeup.

“With me?” I asked in shock. We were near the end of our shift, and I had enough baggage under my eyes to fill an Alaskan cruise boat.

Ramsey came out of left field, giving Bradley his unsolicited viewpoint while he still spoke with Poppy. “And why would you need Officer Walker’s photograph?” he muttered our way.

Bradley again gave his best profile to the cameras. “I want to show Officer Walker’s face to my producer. I could use her in my next movie. We’re going to start filming in the next few months. Girl, the camera’s gonna love you,” he said to me. “You’re adorable.”

Poppy’s eyes widened in shock. “But what about your novel, baby?”

Bradley glanced heavenward as though God was speaking directly to him. “I’m thinking I need to put it on hold.”

Poppy blinked. A part of me felt sorry for her. Chances were she would be dealing with two big Ls soon—loss of the Lambo and loss of a lover.

“But you said you felt the spirit telling you to guide people,” she refuted.

My guess was money was guiding him more. Bradley forced me into a selfie as I continued to write up the report. I gave him

zero smile, and when he asked for a profile shot, I gave him the back of my head. The paparazzi found that funny. One of the more aggressive types then had the gall to straight up ask for a pic of his infamous six-pack abs. Bradley sighed, removing the T-shirt he'd just tugged back on. He obviously didn't mind being sexually objectified.

"I can tell you're lukewarm on the idea," he said to me, sighing. He threw his shirt over his shoulder. "But if I don't get this picture to the producer today, the studio might go with that bimbo who just put out her own makeup line. That stuff is shit," he said with a scoff.

"Yeah, it's shit," Poppy echoed, adding her own scoff.

Hey, that's showbiz.

I gave Poppy an ink pen to sign her official report. She took the pen from my hand, and either nerves had gotten the best of her or she didn't know how to operate a BIC. I clicked the top with my thumb and literally placed the pen to paper, requesting a signature. When Poppy scrawled out her one-named signature in a flowery script, I ripped the sheet of paper from my pad, handing it to her along with my business card.

"Come on, Officer Walker," Bradley flirted when I reminded Poppy to phone if she remembered anything else. "The camera's gonna love that face."

I wore size twenty-seven jeans. Very little about my body produced a ripple of excitement on the male hormones. It said farmhand.

"I'm cool where I am," I said.

"You sure? Couldn't you use some extra cash?"

Extra green would always be great, but no...

"I'm just going to pick up some detail work," I said.

"I can get you detail work," he said. "Besides, this job is way too dangerous for someone like you."

I'd just been insulted but let it slide. Unfortunately, it wasn't

the first time someone had sounded off on my career choice, unsolicited. “I’m good.”

Bradley wouldn’t take no for an answer. “Hey, maybe I overstepped. I’m producing a movie that’s coming out early summer, and we’re doing a few reshoots now. Would you like to security guard on set? It might be a haul for you to get to the location, but I’ll make sure money is good.”

I could use the money, but I didn’t have the typical M-F gig, so scheduling would be hard. Besides, I didn’t think it would be apropos to receive a favor from someone like Josh Bradley.

The man went swami and read my mind. “Listen, I assume you’re on the night shift here, but they shoot a lot in the evening and at all times of the week. Let me make a call. I can guarantee you a job.”

Bradley went for the hard sell, sliding his bulky arm around my shoulder and pulling me close. More than likely it was nothing more than your average flirting, but I didn’t like it when someone’s hands were close to my gun. I maneuvered out of his reach and took a step backward.

“Thank you, but I’ve found my calling. Sorry about the car,” I said, turning to Poppy. “I’ll give the incident report to Detective Riley Shafer, and he’ll follow up with you in the next day or so. He’s thorough, so if the car can be found, he’ll sniff it out like a foxhound.”

“You say such nice things,” I heard a deep voice boom from behind.

The loud slam of a car door had me glancing over my shoulder and out sauntered Detective Riley Shafer from an unmarked police car. Shafer worked days, so why he was up this early insinuated he was working on something he felt needed the extra hours. A detective assigned to robbery in the Robbery-Homicide Division, he was tall at six foot three with sandy-blond hair and icy-blue eyes. Having the muscles of the Incredible Hulk, we’d met my first week in the academy when

he'd volunteered to help with our physical evaluations. He later joined me during a ride-along when I picked up extra cash as a delivery driver. What started out to be a boring night shift ended with me on the floor of 7-Eleven being choked by someone I considered a friend.

Pizza delivery could be a tough field.

After Ramsey brought Detective Shafer up to speed on the particulars, I glanced around the crime scene. Security cameras were angled at most storefronts, and I assumed they were in operation because those particular clothing stores specialized in one of a kind pieces. This century's runway models and Beverly Hills girls seemed to wear them in their downtime when they weren't human billboards for fashion designers. Honestly, performing a bump-and-run in this neck of the woods was a dumb move because once Shafer got the video feed, he might be able to get a license plate and/or positive ID. Besides, two blocks up was a stretch of real estate that had no working security cameras anywhere. Ramsey and I answered a call there the prior day when a woman opened her gallery and found she was minus some pricey art. Her alarm didn't go off, and the security cameras on the entire street were conveniently blacked out with spray paint. So unless the owners got them replaced within twelve hours, then my guess was they were still blacked out.

Shafer pulled me aside as Bradley and his sidepiece posed for the paparazzi. "Your name is all over the station, superstar. Fat Tony has quite the rap sheet. Do you need to take a vacation day? Maybe get out of the country?"

"I'm not afraid of Fat Tony."

Detective Shafer squinted his light blue eyes, like he was thinking too hard. "You should be. Where was Ramsey when this was going down?"

Ramsey held more secrets than a priest, but I kept all of them. The last thing I would do would be to rat out my partner.

“Community goodwill,” I said, not really lying because I was pretty sure whoever-she-was thought Ramsey was good.

“No one dishes out goodwill like, Ramsey,” he muttered, frowning in his direction. Eh, that meant Ramsey’s secret wasn’t so secret. “We’re going to shelve that thought for the moment,” he said. I inwardly rolled my eyes. For some reason, I attracted the bossy alpha-type. “What do you think?” he asked me.

“Dumb suspect.”

“Why?”

I pointed to the two visible security cameras stationed at the three o’clock position of where the car had been snatched. Poppy said the woman driver looked sketchy. Did she and/or the actual thief need some quick cash? So much that they were willing to overlook something that could potentially hang them?

Shafer nodded. “Good, Walker.”

“Chop shop?” I asked. A chop shop was a business or location where stolen vehicles were literally chopped up—or dismantled—and the stolen parts were sold or used to build and/or repair other stolen vehicles. Cars were scrubbed of vin numbers with new ones applied, making tracing a stolen vehicle next to impossible. Cars would then be sold, and the owner wouldn’t have a clue to its origins.

Shafer pulled at his chin in deep concentration. “If they’re good, the Lambo is already stripped down with a new vin added.”

I stared hard into the air where Shafer was staring, literally trying to see what he saw. Shafer was one of best robbery detectives on the force. I wanted homicide, but it wasn’t like I’d turn down robbery if the opportunity ever arose. “So if the woman driver was strung out, do you think she was a stand-in?” I asked.

“Possibly. Normal driver could’ve been sick. Quit. Had another job offer elsewhere. Hell, he or she could have a legit day job. Any number of possibilities.”

I drove home my point. “I still wouldn’t say she was the normal driver. A normal driver is going to have this thing down to a science, knowing all the stops, starts, and turns along the way. In fact, the normal driver—or head of this ring—probably even follows Bradley on Twitter to find out what he’s doing. The person driving was an idiot. She was either under the influence or dumb because two more streets, and she wouldn’t have any security feed to worry about.”

Shafer glanced down the road to see what I referred to, even though it was dark. “And how would you know there’s no feed?”

I told Shafer about the art theft of the previous day.

Shafer frowned, smacking his gum—something I’d noticed he did when he was holding back his thoughts. “I didn’t hear of this case, and for a dollar value like that, I’m surprised it wasn’t routed to me immediately.”

“Detective Adler got the paperwork. At least, I gave it to him, and he said he’d route it appropriately.” Detective Guy Adler and I aggressively disliked one another. He was an a-hole chauvinist who obviously was stealing cases from Shafer.

Shafer got a strange look on his face but didn’t comment. And I knew where that look originated. There had been rumors Adler had requested a switch from homicide to robbery, claiming burnout. The switch hadn’t happened yet, but if it did, Adler would have less seniority in that side of the business than Shafer. Meaning he would chase down petty theft like shoplifting, switching price tags in stores, eat-and-runs, and watch-and-runs. An art gallery would automatically go to Shafer because it was grand larceny, but Adler obviously stole it. The goon was trying to pad his résumé before he even had the job.

Shafer blew out a measured breath. “The detective gig is coming, Walker,” he said. “Just do your time, and you know I’m in your corner.” He then grinned, pitching his head to Bradley.

I pivoted around, and Bradley gave me a circle wave, continuing with the hard sell and mouthing, “Call me.”

Shafer chuckled, but the sound was little on mirth. “You’re not falling for that, are you?”

“I’m more than a cheap bottle of wine and a movie,” I muttered.

Shafer leaned down in my space. “He wouldn’t give you cheap wine, Walker. It would probably be a bottle of Dom.”

CHAPTER 6

REDNECK RANCH

We answered a call for assistance on the Watson Brothers lot a little after five thirty a.m. A scuffle had broken out on the *Redneck Ranch* set between stars, and security was having trouble containing it. According to Dispatch, a white male pulled a knife on another white male, and when the showrunner tried to break up the fight, he inadvertently got clocked in the face. Apparently, the showrunner wasn't loved on set, and once it dawned on the cast he had a bloody mouth and nose, another hillbilly-for-hire shot off a pipe bomb in celebration.

Impact had produced a few injuries.

I needed a nerve pill.

I'd seen a few episodes of *Redneck Ranch* since it was Pixie Taylor's guilty pleasure, and it had quite the cult following across the world. The story centered around the life of Bubba Joe Howard, his new horse farm, and his on-again/off-again wife Joylinn. And more recently, her college sweetheart, Ray Donn Knight.

With accents and redneck dialect too indigenous and challenging to understand, some episodes included subtitles. One thing a viewer could count on, though, was drama. And drama

happened when Bubba Joe decided to try his hand at horse breeding just because Ray Donn Knight's family had bred a Triple Crown champion. Right out of the gate, Bubba Joe struck gold with a horse that won several races, making him a ton of cash. But he also bought several horses as a follow-up that should've gone straight to the glue factory. Watching the Howards acclimate to their newfound wealth and inability to pick a horse that would make bank was entertainment at its finest. Add in beer-guzzling, women wrestling pigs, armpit and knee farting, and a weekly feast of deep-fried, unnamed reptiles, and it was enough to land them in the top ten Nielsen ratings weekly.

After gate security gave us the all-clear, we were directed to an approved parking space in front of the particular set we were visiting. Once Ramsey turned off the engine, I exited the car, stretching. At this time of my shift, my coordination could get sloppy. Ramsey and I usually hit up a liquor or convenience store for snacks and to get a quick coffee, but since the call came in, we couldn't get any extra calories.

Peachy-pink streetlamps lit the way to the big metal building with a number eleven on the door. Twisting the door-knob and pushing it wide, it was like we'd run into a buzzsaw of Southern motifs and stereotypes. One side had been dedicated to the redneck or hillbilly side of the family including a rusty, white trailer and dilapidated house with a wrecked Camaro on cinderblocks in front. Four-wheelers were parked in the shared driveway next to a black monster truck that had the teeth of a vampire on its hood.

The opposite portion of the lot held a red brick mansion with white columns that Bubba Joe and Joylinn resided in. A white Mercedes sat next to a white Cadillac and a white Dodge Ram truck in a circle drive. A speedboat a little on the ostentatious side was housed in a separate unattached garage with the name *Joylinn's Joy* in black cursive.

Being on a movie set wasn't glamorous. Weather machines were in constant motion as well as saws and hammers, kicking up clouds of dust with the changing construction and tinkering of a set.

By the looks of things, the cast had been in the middle of an early morning shoot because nearly twenty people stood in front of a country store on the hillbilly side of the set. Blue jean overalls and different shades of flannel and lengths of mullets stood mouths agape, trying to take in the unexpected turn of events. Intermingled between were designer jeans and college sweatshirts from the University of Kentucky and University of Louisville. Throw in a Harvard and it was as diverse as diverse could be.

As soon as our presence was noted, we were approached by lot security, a young man no older than eighteen or nineteen who looked like his life had just flashed before his eyes. He brought us up to speed with a story virtually the same as Dispatch had given.

When two people were involved in an altercation of any kind, officers split up, and one would interview one of the victims with the second officer interviewing the other. Ramsey had opened his mouth to speed things along, but an older man came forward with hands raised in a sorry-to-have-bothered-you pose—like the phone call had been a mistake from minute-one. I wasn't so sure his brain was firing right, and while his lips moved, I realized a front tooth had been broken off at the root.

My right hand strayed to my gun. It was an impulse reaction whenever we encountered a domestic—something I attributed as the need to survive.

“Good morning, officers. I'm Roland Holiday,” he said, “showrunner of *Redneck Ranch*. It appears there has been a misunderstanding.”

The showrunner was the leading producer on a television

set, outranking the writers and directors. In short, Holiday had the final creative and management say-so.

Ramsey squinted his eyes, focusing on Holiday's teeth—or lack thereof. "A broken tooth is definitely not a misunderstanding," he said.

The showrunner spread his mouth wide, mimicking a toothpaste commercial, offering a destroyed smile and thousands of dollars' worth of dental work to come. "This?" he said, pointing to the gap and running his tongue over the stub. "I had too much to drink and fell...but I'm obviously of age," he quickly added, "so my drinking should be a moot point."

Holiday's more salt than pepper hair was tailored but long enough to hit his shoulders in a style seen more on someone half his age. He sported dark jeans and a custom navy sweater with the *Redneck Ranch* logo embroidered over the heart. On his feet were a pair of red Chuck Taylors. I guessed him to be in his sixties, and his shoes reminded me of an old-guy-trying-too-hard.

Who I recognized as Joylinn Howard pushed through the crowd of congregating flannel. Her coal-black hair had a dramatic widow's peak down the middle, and it was bundled at the nape in a messy ponytail with a scarlet ribbon wrapped around it in a bow. "Hello, officers," she said to us. "I'm Joylinn, and that's not what happened." Joylinn's pink-painted grin might've been broad, but it was a cloaking device. She was angry or irritated. Maybe both. Fishing her arm through Holiday's, she attempted to arrest control of the conversation. "He should've never been brought onto the cast. It's been nothing but trouble since he got here."

Joylinn's black eyes electrified, sizzling like two steaks on a grill.

Who's she speaking about? Ray Donn? The ex?

Holiday patted the arm Joylinn had linked through his, trying to comfort her—or perhaps defuse. I wasn't sure. "Trust

me,” he murmured to Ramsey and me. “Everything is fine, officers. This week’s script got a little out of hand. Sometimes that happens.”

Ramsey pulled out his PNB, flipping open to a clean page to take dictation. “So everything that happened here tonight...the fight...the missing tooth...the pipe bomb...all of that was scripted?”

Holiday grinned big, giving us another glimpse of his bloody nub. “Well, not the tooth, but the rest...yes.”

*I call bullsh*t.*

Holiday shooed Joylinn off with an arm squeeze, and when she strutted off with a *humpf* and her nose in the air, Ramsey exhaled. “Normally, I would say there were violations of California Penal Code 415 and Penal Code 417. Since you are claiming everything was scripted, Mr. Holiday, there isn’t a lot I can do for you unless you want to charge whoever hit you and knocked out your tooth. That is battery under the law.”

Commonly known as disturbing the peace and brandishing a weapon respectively, Ramsey explained to get a conviction, the prosecutor had to prove someone hit someone—or drew a weapon—in the presence of another person. One look at the eyes on the set, no one intended on saying anything, let alone corroborate the story the security guard had relayed.

And why was that? Because if we hauled someone off to jail, then production would halt, and halting production would be a loss of God only knew how many dollars.

When officers could not prove a law had been broken for lack of evidence or lack of witness cooperation, they could write up an incident report so if it happened again, a record was on file. Ramsey explained that to Holiday and the cast, informing them the report could then be used as evidence if a case should ever go to trial.

Hillbilly Number One came forward. “Well, why would we

want an incident report? These things need to be taken care of by family.”

“And you are?” Ramsey asked.

“Cletus,” he replied. Cletus dangled his arm around a man next to him who I recognized as Ray Donn Knight.

“No last name?” Ramsey said sarcastically.

“Don’t need one,” he explained. “I’m like Britney, Madonna, Cher, and Lady Gaga. People know me just by saying my name.”

In the South, formal names would oftentimes only be used for birth and death certificates. So if you didn’t have a nickname, chances were someone didn’t think you were important enough in the family narrative. As a consequence, most on the show had legally adopted one-name monikers.

It didn’t take long to figure out that the two men fighting had been Ray Donn Knight and Cletus—who after some prodding admitted his surname was legally Owens. As a rule, we normally referred to suspects and vics by their last names—or even victim one or victim two. With names like Ray Donn and Cletus, I couldn’t deny my mouth the enjoyment of saying their names. One look at Cletus, white male number one, and Ray Donn, white male number two, and they could not be more diametrically opposed. With long, brown hair that resembled a caveman, Cletus wore bibbed overalls with a camo wife-beater underneath. Ray Donn was clad in tailored khaki pants with a white button-down shirt rolled to the elbows. A loose red tie hung from his neck. The clothing choices weren’t the only differences. Cletus had a bloody mouth and Ray Donn had one blacked eye, a puffy lip, and a nose that was so mangled the jury was out on whether it had been broken. Red marks stained his neck. Someone had strangled him—or at least given the process the old freshman try.

Still resting my right hand near my gun, I said, “I understand that rationale. Just out of curiosity, can you tell me why

you'd want to hit Ray Donn anyway? I've seen the show. Big fan. Watch it every week," I lied.

"But I didn't hit Ray Donn," Cletus refuted. His dark eyes narrowed into small holes—a characteristic emphasized by a crooked mouth that was two sizes too large for his face.

Ah, so Cletus was smarter than what I'd given him credit. "Hypothetically speaking, of course," I said.

Cletus opened the metaphorical floodgates, claiming the argument was between two cousins over a woman. Of course, it was.

"Someone broke someone else's heart by cheating with his woman," Cletus said. "That person's a traitor."

Ray Donn Knight's face went blood-red—so bright you could see it from outer space. "That someone else's marriage to Alicia was over," he replied flippantly.

Cletus issued a counter-argument. "You don't cheat with family. If you're gonna cheat, make sure it's with a stranger or the woman of some man you hate!"

That argument did hold some water.

By the self-righteous venom spewing from Cletus' veins, I'd lay money he was the one wronged.

Ray Donn crossed his arms over his chest. "Well, Alicia told me you had something with Harley last year. And she's your bloody third cousin."

Ooohhh. Juicy. Cletus Owens couldn't keep his beast in check either.

"Ancient history," Cletus said in a double snort.

Holiday stepped between them like he mentally tried to untangle an octopus hellbent on crushing a scuba diver. "Okay, that's enough, fellas," he interjected. "This is getting embarrassing."

Seriously. It was just getting good.

One thing about the South, they didn't hide from their sins for long. One might have the initial embarrassment, but before

long, the figurative pregnant female would be sitting on the front row church pew all but convinced her baby was immaculate and nothing short of Jesus reincarnate. Part of that was because Southerners felt there was a purpose for everything—even down to their ugliest of sins.

Holiday maneuvered himself between Cletus and Ray Donn. “Officers, we appreciate your prompt service, but if you don’t mind, we’d like to keep shooting the scene.” Placing a palm on each man’s chest, he pushed them backward, giving them that time-is-money face. Once they melted into the crowd, Holiday turned back to me, his brown eyes lasering on my rear end. “You have a nice ass.”

Okurrrrr. Sexually inappropriate. “Uh, thank you?” I said in shock.

He rubbed his chin, deep in thought. “No, I mean a really nice ass.” He gazed at my rear end as though he were evaluating the stock market.

“Thank you again,” I mumbled.

Still sizing up my glutes, he added, “Fern needs a body double. More specifically an ass double. Need a job?” He glanced over his shoulders and yelled for Fern to show herself. A few seconds later, a pudgy bottled blond in a triple-XL flannel shirt waddled forward in Daisy Dukes, embarrassed.

I’d had my fair share of body image issues, but Fern’s butt had more curds in it than a container of cottage cheese. Plus, her shorts were so short she had a denim wedgy. I didn’t know how they would sell a butt double to the audience, but I had a feeling the targeted demographic wasn’t the brainy type.

“Thank you for the compliment, but I’m happy.”

Right before we left while enduring the standard we-love-the-folks-wearing-blue speech, I scanned the cast. Not only were Ray Donn and his cousin, Cletus, bloody, but so was Bubba Joe—exhibiting a blackened eye that was growing. It was only at mere glance, but enough was said that I knew there

was more to the story than what had been some good method acting and creativity at the writer's table. Where Cletus and Ray Donn looked exhausted, Bubba Joe's demeanor told me whoever had struck him merely got in a good shot. Bubba Joe wasn't even winded—his somber face saying he was ready for round two.



At six-twenty in the morning, my mind was in neutral, and I wasn't really thinking about anything more than my bed. So when Ramsey said he needed to use the restroom and return a call to his sometimes girlfriend, Monet Cruz, all I did was grunt when he headed for an all-night liquor store to use the facilities. Thing was, Ramsey barely had one wheel in the parking lot before Monet, FaceTimed—wondering why he hadn't returned her calls the three times prior.

“Answer that for me?” he asked.

Oh, boy. I lifted his phone from the cup holder and slid my finger across the screen, staring into Monet's face.

Hello, Buzzkill...I mean, “Monet,” I said out loud. “Barron's trying to find a parking space.”

“Is that right?” she said tersely. “Well, tell him to turn around.”

He glanced up into the rearview mirror. “Oh, God,” he said. “Please tell me she didn't.”

I shot a glance over my shoulder just in time to see Monet flash her lights. Ramsey needed to reset his girlfriend button because Monet had reached a whole new level of stalker. She had to be listening to a scanner or at the least following our car. “Monet, go home,” he said into the screen.

Monet's voice climbed. “I don't want to go home. Come back here and talk to me. What is it that you've been doing all night?”

Tall with raven-colored hair that held a hint of red, Monet was a real punch to a woman's ovaries, all right? She was beautiful and knew how to accentuate the positive. I'd never seen her slumming in jeans and a T-shirt. It was always designer-this and designer-that, highlighting the curves of a 36-24-36 figure. Her South American features were undeniably modelesque. And Monet liked it when another woman knew it and came up lacking.

Ramsey squirmed in his seat. "My *job*, for starters," he muttered in answer.

Finding a vacant spot, he slid the automobile into it and turned off the engine, taking the phone from my hand.

Monet started screaming like a demon, possessed. Honestly, very little made sense, and I was pretty close to bilingual. My nanny—translation, cheap baby-sitter—was Puerto Rican. I was not only fluent in the language but with South American slang in general. When I made out the phrase that there was "another man who understood her," I mouthed the revelation to Ramsey.

"So there's someone else?" he said, not in the least bit worried.

Ramsey angled his phone my way, so I could see. Monet answered him with a nod, adding, "But I would like to be exclusive with you."

She then added a visual of their wild monkey sex to close the deal, which embarrassed Ramsey. Monet segued to what she was going to make for dinner that night—tacking on she'd bought him a new pair of pants and that the grass needed to be mowed, even in November. The random ramblings signaled she was just this side of being inebriated or stoned to the point of needing detox.

A problem that I recognized from day-one.

Ramsey had introduced us my first night on the job, and I saw the signs of drug use then. When Monet drove off in her

silver Beemer, I glanced at him and word-vomited, *She's high*. His simple answer was, *Nothing new. It's been a problem for close to a year*. Ramsey and I never spoke of her addiction on a regular basis, but I could see it in his face when she phoned. He would stare at her digits and wonder which Monet he would get. Sweet Monet or High Monet. Tragic thing was, every time I was in her presence, I felt like I needed to ready myself for chest compressions.

Fear or foreshadowing. My mind hadn't decided yet.

Monet flicked her lights off and on four times—not liking that solution—then lay on the horn. Ramsey jumped, fearing she would wake the families in the houses nearby. He briefly glanced heavenward, muttering, “God, help me.” He spoke to me next, without turning to meet my eyes because he was afraid not to surveil her. “Walker,” he said.

“I've got you,” I promised, placing my hand on the door to get out.

He shook his head, lukewarm on the idea. “Stay. She won't try anything, but watch her in case I'm wrong.”

For one braindead second, that felt like a good idea, but then I had this fear the next time I saw Ramsey, it could be sunny side up with his eyes fixed in the stare of the dead. I sighed. Against my better judgment, I stayed put but kept close watch on Monet's hands.

Ramsey opened his door, hand on weapon, and met Monet's silhouette as she strode toward him.

She was a striking figure and was barefoot in navy, silk pajamas with mascara smudged underneath her lashes. Her hair, however, was still styled and in place—she hadn't slept yet, which meant she'd been up all night and hadn't even laid down on a pillow.

“Monet,” Ramsey said quietly, as if he dismantled a bomb with his mere voice. “Please, go home. We can talk later.”

Monet rolled her eyes like Ramsey was a complete moron.

“I just want to be with you, baby, and would’ve been exclusive a year ago, but you couldn’t kick old habits.”

“Being a police officer is not a habit. It’s a job.” Ramsey’s voice dropped a decibel.

Monet took a step toward him and grabbed his forearms. My nerves started prickling. That move made her one grab away from Ramsey’s weapon. He latched ahold of her wrists, holding her hands in place. “Are you sure about that?” she said, and I knew she referred to me.

“I’m just the long-suffering partner,” I shouted through my rolled down window.

Monet painted on a sincere, fat, and cheesy smile. The female in me knew it was fake.

“Sure you are,” she said, snorting another imaginary line of coke I was pretty sure she’d done minutes earlier.

Ramsey caught on quickly. “Are you using again, Monet? You swore to me you were done.”

Monet tried to sniff the evidence away. “I’m not using.”

“I know the signs,” he said.

She got up in his face. “Screw you, Barron. You’ve never believed in me.”

On that happy note, Monet turned on her bare feet while Ramsey promised the air around him he would call her later. With a battle-worn sigh, he watched her back up and speed away, then walked inside to use the facilities, once again clicking me inside with his key-fob like people did with their pets. Reaching underneath my seat to locate a bag that had a skein of dark gray yarn in it, I pulled it out along with some crocheting needles to finish a scarf I was making Dylan for Christmas.

I then called up the newest episode of my favorite Mexican soap opera on my cell phone.

One of the lead characters had an attempt on her life—someone laced her mojito with arsenic—and the next episode

was slated to be the grand reveal of who the assassin had been. You know things have gone sideways when you're in the middle of some good Mexican fighting and someone pounds a fist on the window in a loud *rap-rap-rap*.

Startled by the noise, I fumbled my phone and dropped my knitting needles, whirling around to see the silver barrel of a nine pointed right at my face. I breathed. The man breathed. And cue that on a repeat about six more times. The man holding the gun was Bunyanesque with dark, brown hair and three necks on a round face that held zero cognition of right from wrong. A short cigar hung out of one side of his mouth, and his beefy hand was so big that the gun he'd brandished looked like a toy. Should I take a chance? Go for my gun? Exit and attempt to talk him down?

My mind traveled back to Louie Dickerson. He might have the mental aptitude of a garden rake, but at least he had valid intel. He said Fat Tony would send someone else...and sure enough, he'd farmed out the job once more.

By the size of the man's apple-shaped torso, I'd lay money he visited the buffet with Fat Tony on a regular basis.

Sliding my left hand up to my chest, I activated my bodycam.

"Fat Tony sent you," I screamed through the glass, "and if he wants his money back, you're wasting your breath."

"We understand Louie failed to execute the job Fat Tony gave him."

Very diplomatically put. "Kidnap me? Or get his money back? I wasn't quite sure what Louie was trying to accomplish, to be honest." I took a quick five-second breather. "May I come out?" I held up both hands, trying to show him I didn't intend on pulling my gun...at least not yet. But I needed his nine out of my face. I'd been shot before—just a graze—but that burn was something I wanted to avoid at all costs. Emphasis on the avoiding part.

The man lowered his nine to his side, giving me a wide berth to open my door and exit. Wearing a black shirt and white silk tie, he didn't appear to be the kidnapping type. Considering his crappy sense of fashion choices, he stuck out like a fly on a wedding cake.

When we stood face to face, he murmured, "Fat Tony wants to offer you a job."

I fought the urge to curl my hand around my GLOCK. If I did, he might take aim and fire. If I didn't, then I just might be able to glean where Fat Tony was living, so we could haul his rear end in. And speaking of Fat Tony, what exactly was his endgame? To pull the plug on me permanently once I dumbly traveled to Vegas?

"Doing what?" I asked.

"Dealing or counting cards for him. You choose."

Unexpected, and I did a mental deep dive of my skills, wondering if I could do it. "Tell him thanks for the job offer," I answered, "but I have a great retirement plan with the force."

"You wouldn't need a retirement plan with Fat Tony. He's prepared to give you forty percent of every pot you bring in."

Hard to pass up. "Can he add on free dental?" I said facetiously.

"But Fat Tony said you liked him."

Let me put it this way, if I was a surgeon and Fat Tony was my patient, I would intentionally leave a sponge in him. He had money. I won it fair and square. That was the gist of our past and future encounters.

"I'm going to be honest with you, uh...exactly what is your name?"

"Vito Roselli."

"Listen, Vito Roselli. Fat Tony didn't give me the butterfly-in-the-tummy feeling, all right? I have a major beef with someone who has employees pull their nines on me. And that's

twice within the past twenty-four hours. Tell his royal fatness that he isn't exactly making his job offer appealing."

Roselli pulled the front of his shirt from the waistband of his pants and raised it to wipe his face, placing a beer belly and pasta gut on display for anyone who was in the market to lose their appetite. After a few deep breaths, he held his chest like he was in the middle of a cardiac infarction. "What's wrong with you?" I asked.

Roselli swallowed down a burp. "I've had indigestion all day. This isn't normally my kind of gig."

"So you're just a gratuitous cameo then," I said snarkily.

"I'm a cameo everywhere, Walker. My kids barely talk to me. My wife is in name only. All I have is this damn job, and honestly..."

He took a step toward me, his hand still gripping his gun.

My pulse quickened. "If you don't back up, I'm going to arrest you for theft on top of pulling a gun on an officer."

"What exactly did I steal?"

"My air for starters. Back. Off." Roselli grabbed his chest again, wincing. "Maybe you shouldn't have gone to all those Taco Tuesdays with Fat Tony," I said. I removed the cigar from his mouth, wondering if he was moments from going horizontal and if I'd have to perform CPR.

He glanced at the cigar in my hand, frowning. "I don't like a woman who smokes."

Heat flooded my face, a righteous indignation shooting through my core. "You know, you're a major a-hole. I hadn't planned on smoking it."

Roselli's mouth curled into a grin. "Those words really scared the hell out of me."

I added a, "Dammit."

The a-hole straight out chuckled. "Now I'm practically pissing my pants."

Is it okay to hit him in the face? Like make a fist and swing for the moon?

I wet my lips. “You seem to have a decent sense of humor but crappy sense of timing. I get the feeling you don’t really want to hurt me. So what exactly were you trying to accomplish here tonight?”

“I’d like to know that too,” Ramsey’s voice boomed from behind. He placed his GLOCK at Roselli’s temple like a message from God.

Vito Roselli looked like a guy who was without a chair when the music stopped. The next sequence of events happened before I could will back the hands of time. He made a sound like a dying animal, a feral grunt where he knew he’d gone someplace he’d never been before with no logical way back. His legs collapsed underneath him, and his gun fell to the ground. The crash caused his gun to discharge in a loud bang, striking an automobile beside us. Ramsey ducked, and I dived into a midair roll. Even though I tried to right myself, my body wouldn’t halt its forward progression, and I skinned my elbows, ripping the sleeves of my uniform. Roselli groaned and face-planted right before us. The fall wasn’t in the least bit coordinated. His legs scissored, and he bounced twice trying to negotiate with the asphalt—the concrete offering him cosmetic facial reconstruction he hadn’t asked for.

Ramsey and I dropped to a squat beside him. Roselli was feverish and sweaty, and it took both of us to transfer him to his side and onto his back. Pain lanced his face, and his jawline contorted in a grimace. His mouth moved in raw agony—like he longed to say something.

True panic coursed through my veins. He was having a heart attack. I should’ve seen the signs. Couple his body type with being a smoker, and he was a grenade where someone had pulled the pin.

While Ramsey dialed 911, I whispered, “Just hang tight, Vito. You’re going to be okay.”

He latched onto my eyes like they were the only thing keeping him anchored to this world...

blinked once...

...and died.