

# SIDE HUSTLE (SAMPLE)

---

A FEMALE SLEUTH THRILLER

A. J. LAPE

Copyright © 2018 by A. J. Lape

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Cover by Brittny Wroblewski

✿ Created with Vellum

*To Recon Trish, the voice of Darcy Walker and Blaine, my LA Yoda. Thank you for putting me on the streets of Los Angeles.*



## 1 UGLY PIZZA

Like many moving to the entertainment capital of the world, I was a girl chasing a dream.

My dream didn't include fame or my name in bright city lights. My dream entailed wearing a badge and catching the bad guy of your nightmares.

My name's Darcy Walker, and I relocated to Los Angeles, California, right out of high school to attend the police academy. Problem was, I couldn't join until I was twenty and a half years old, so that left a lot of time to hustle. As a newly minted LA native, I was like anyone else—I needed cash to pay rent, cash to eat, and cash to look like I belonged alongside the rich and famous. Since I knew little of LA other than the Walk of Fame, I gave myself a crash course on local street life.

The way I did that? I delivered pizzas—it was the first step in my plan for global domination.

Here was my job interview at Rollo's Ugly Pizza: *Do you identify as male or female? Are you a convicted sex offender? Do you smoke dope, snort dope, drink dope, or anything with dope?* When I answered those questions accordingly, I peed in a cup and five days later was behind the wheel of a car with an "Ugly Pizza" marquis on top.

There were delivery drivers with natural ability—they knew the city grid like the backs of their hands—but what was it that turned a mediocre driver into a professional standout? One answer: a stone-cold hustle. Some drivers were willing to work harder, hurt more, and push past the norm of what common sense said was safe. I'd done that for nearly three years, getting rained on, cursed out, and flipped off on a regular basis. All in the name of delivering a pizza on time. I tried to think of it as perseverance and the will to succeed. In reality, it was stupidity branded with idiocy because my hourly wage would barely buy a false eyelash.

It was mid-March, and I stood in front of Jerald Packer's door at a little before eleven p.m., delivering three eighteen-inch BBQ Chicken pizzas and an order of hot wings. Since Packer was a new customer to Ugly Pizza, I made a point of pouring on the charm, hoping he'd become a return client with large discretionary funds.

I knocked on his door with my elbow, dodging raindrops the size of butterflies. After a six-beat, Packer creaked his door wide, clad in pink women's underwear and wearing a neon-green wig that hit him at the thigh. He was tall and thin with a mesh infinity scarf wound around his neck and an overbite that looked Cro-Magnon. Flipping his hair around like Cher, he flashed me a hairy butt cheek complements of a G-string that was along the scale of a shoe string. In Cincinnati, he would've been dragged in for public indecency. In LA, it was par for the course.

"Mister Packer?" I said, refusing to let my eyes drift south. "Three BBQ Chicken pizzas and an order of hot wings?"

Packer stared me up and down, giving me a case of the willies. "Did you touch them?" he said, jerking his head to the pizzas in the red insulated warmer.

"No."

"Lick them?"

"No."

"Did you do anything to them?"

I paused before I answered. I couldn't get a feel for Packer. Chances were, he would tip me larger if I'd done those things because he already had my pervert meter beeping like a fog horn. I

decided on the honest route, knowing if I misread the man, then it could mean my job should he file a complaint.

“No, Mister Packer. I did not put bodily fluids of any kind on your nightly meal.”

Packer snorted his disapproval, giving me a look of disgust as I removed the pizzas and wings from the delivery bag. Once we did the handoff, he pulled three Hamiltons out of his bra, pitching them my way. Wednesday night was special night because it was our slowest evening of the week. Rollo, my boss, reduced the price of pizzas, and after ten p.m. threw in a small order of hot wings. Packer’s three twenties only left forty-nine cents as a tip.

Quickly snatching up the bills, I swallowed down some profanity and rose up with a forced smile. Unfortunately, Packer thrust his hand in my face, demanding the change.

“No tip?” I said.

“No.”

“Is that a hard no?”

I was like fricking MRSA when I stared down a customer for a tip—I wasn’t going anywhere. Unfortunately, Packer didn’t buckle, but he did offer an alternative. “Why don’t you come in?” he said. “I could use someone like you in the movie I’m making. You’re frickin’ hot.”

I guess I was above average. I was five foot ten, thin, with long blonde hair and green-eyes. But we lived in LA. You could find those stats anywhere, and what wasn’t real, a rich sugar daddy and some lipo could buy. “What would I have to do?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Spank me.” *I should’ve known.* “So?” he pushed.

“I’m gonna pass on the movie, but I would appreciate the forty-nine cents.”

“I’ll give you a tip if you make the movie.”

I swiped at the rain dripping from my nose. “Shave your butt, and maybe I’ll think about it,” I lied.

Packer wouldn’t buckle, claiming his butt hair was artistic expression. When the wind began to make his underwear take on strange shapes, I fished forty-nine cents out of my money bag and

counted it out, placing it in his palm. Once Packer assured himself he hadn't been ripped off, he slammed the door in my face, ending the standoff. Problem was, I'd been standing too close because the big flamingo knocker on the front hit me in the nose and jarred my teeth. My smile and ability to get customer orders anywhere on time were my competitive edge. Right then, both were in jeopardy. I grabbed my nose in the middle of a wince, running my tongue over my teeth. Both were intact. Thank God for the little things.

Giving the flamingo my patented squinty eye of disgust, I jumped off the porch and jogged back to my ride. Zero cents richer.

---

ROLLO'S UGLY Pizza was located in Westwood Village on Broxton Avenue, about five minutes from the University of California, Los Angeles campus. A preferred eatery of students, it wasn't because of the pizza deals—students at UCLA peed out one hundred-dollar bills. It was because Ugly Pizza was open 24/7, and the pizzas were to die for. Plus, students liked the fact Rollo's creations looked different each time you ordered them. Hence, the name ugly. He'd made a career out of messing up in the kitchen.

Shaking the water from my Chuck Taylor sneakers, I hugged the delivery bags to my chest and opened the glass door, removing my houndstooth hat and hanging it on a hook on the wall. I'd purchased my hat at The Gap outlet while chasing a kidnapper a few years back. Normally, it brought me luck. Right then, all it did was make my head itch.

Ugly Pizza was a little more than a hole in the wall, but Rollo feared remodeling would destroy his mojo. Upon entry, there was a small dining area to the left with four tables and two booths. To the right, was a Coca-Cola Freestyle soda fountain, plastic utensils, packets of parmesan, and condiments. As with any evening, I could tell what was cooking by the aroma. Bleu cheese and



barbecue sauce made my tastebuds drool, and it was mixed with the warm creaminess of cheese-stretching mozzarella and an Italian hoagie.

I spotted Rollo in the back corner, breaking down cardboard boxes to put in the dumpster. Rollo was uglier than the backside of a baboon. He had a big square head, close-set brown eyes, black bushy brows, and red cheeks suggesting he liked his liquor too much. Dressed in one of those white jackets that real chefs wore, he could use a larger size, but it was LA. Everyone fantasized about being one size smaller.

Rollo, real name Russell Earls, was a workaholic. Technically, he was only supposed to be on duty during the afternoons, but since his wife worked the graveyard shift at a hotel, he occasionally worked sixteen hours straight, sleeping in his office or Ubering home. Right then, he was on his usual tirade—telling anyone who would listen to pick up after themselves and that cleanliness was next to godliness. Once he reiterated the lecture for a second time, his eyes softened as they fell on me. I was his favorite, but Rollo's and my personalities were kind of like a cinder block dating a river. We both had OCD, but Rollo's anal retention made me look as relaxed as the Dalai Lama.

“So how was Packer?” he asked.

“Cheap. No tip.”

One corner of Rollo's fat lips quirked up into a smile. “He called and said he didn't like you. Said you owed him an apology.”

I sent that apology to the deepest, darkest depths of kiss-my-ass. “I'm not sure what gave him that idea. The fact that I failed to spit on his food or the fact that I turned down a role in his movie and wouldn't spank his hairy butt cheeks.”

Rollo blanched. “You're kidding.”

“I don't kid at this hour. I don't have the energy.”

“You're a saint, Walker,” he muttered.

“Only on Sunday mornings.”

He raised a bushy brow. “Are you okay? I need you to be okay out there. I've got a bad feeling about tonight.”

Rollo spoke of my job as if it were a warzone. Sometimes it

was, and my boyfriend's grandfather had given me a stun gun "just because." You know, what every delivery driver needed in her arsenal—next to napkins and change. So technically, I was okay. Emotionally? I couldn't decide if I needed a hug, three shots of tequila, or a night of binge-watching *Sponge Bob*. In the middle of rush hour during the night shift, my tips were low. But out of the three shifts Ugly Pizza drivers ran, I'd picked the night shift for a reason. From nine to five a.m., most weren't fiscally responsible and oftentimes threw wads of cash at me because they were half asleep.

Not so with Jerald Packer.

*Sometimes people are just a-holes.*

As a delivery driver, I made less than minimum wage but a dollar for each delivery made, plus tips. Getting paid once a week, at least I went home with my tips and delivery fees nightly. Signing into the cash register, I deposited Ugly Pizza's take from my run, saying a quickie prayer that Packer developed leprosy on his butt. While I grabbed a fresh breadstick, Ephraim Cohn slid pizzas into the white cardboard boxes, attaching the receipts on top. Ephraim was sixty something, barely skimming five feet, and the night shift cook. Ephraim quit or got fired from four other jobs in three months. Well, two point five months, but I rounded up to not make it sound so bad. He also didn't have one hair on his body...including eyebrows. He reminded me of Gollum but with the heart of Frodo.

My mood picked up once he told me the next delivery was an order to UCLA's Double XL fraternity house for a pledge party. As an Ugly Pizza customer, you could request specific shapes of pizza for an extra charge. Double XL's regularly requested shape was a set of cheese Double-Ds, complete with pepperoni nipples.

"Good luck on the tip," Ephraim said shyly, sliding lopsided black readers back on his nose. "And like Rollo said, be safe. I've got a weird feeling too."

"Thanks, buddy." I wasn't worried about weird feelings. I specialized in weird.

After I loaded twelve pizzas into three red warmers, I popped

SIDE HUSTLE (SAMPLE)

my lucky hat on my head and gripped the carriers, swinging my hip into the door. I was hit with a misty rain and wind shears so powerful they nearly knocked me down. *Listen, LA. I moved here expecting more out of you.* But Mother Nature—in all her power-loving glory—was being a royal pain in the butt tonight. Let's hope the Double XL frat guys weren't.

## 2 DOUBLE XL

UCLA was so massive it had its own zip code, and although I made deliveries all over town, one busy shift at UCLA could keep me hopping until morning. On the rare slow night, I would shoot pool with some of the frat guys until Rollo summoned me back to the shop. Rollo called it cheap advertisement. I called it an opportunity to shark the guys in a game of eight-ball.

I slid out of the car, carrying the dozen pizzas to the front door of Double XL fraternity. Chi Chi Lambda (XXΛ), or Double XL as most called it, was in a large white brick building with gray shutters, sitting on Gayley Avenue of fraternity row. Like most of the late-night party circuit in general, they kept Ugly Pizza in business, phoning when their fraternity escapades produced the munchies.

Painting on a megawatt smile, I knocked on the door with my toe, pausing to observe a group of guys LARPing in the front yard. LARPing was live action role playing—a phenomenon publicly thought to be weird but privately was one of those things you couldn't help but watch. Those on the front lawn were reenacting a scene including swords, chanting some Medieval spell of protection while they went at it.

College life: some of us were cut out for it while others were

like me. ADHD still had me in its grips, and I'd probably LARP all day and never make it to class.

After a five-beat at the door, Double XL opened with the smiling mug of Bodhi Kessler. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. Bodhi had a bangin' bod with black hair and hazel eyes, oozing with as much stud-factor as my boyfriend. We met on one of my first delivery runs when Bodhi was butchering a karaoke version of "Islands in the Stream." For a tip, I jumped to the mic with him and sang Kenny Rogers' part while he sang Dolly Parton's. The air conditioning vent caught his hair and framed his face, a debut scripted right out of a screenplay. Thing was, I discovered he wasn't the douchebag frat type. He was as real as it gets. Hollywood royalty, Bodhi's father was Jack Kessler, a top-shelf character actor that every studio had on speed dial. Jack Kessler was weirder than crap and a member of the cultish Church to the Stars, but the man could make you believe he was anything from a mob hitman to a cartoon character with wings.

"Yo, Darcy," Bodhi murmured. "Where you be, girl? Rollo keepin' you on a tight leash?"

"Just making bank," I told him. "Twelve Double-Ds?" I asked. Bodhi crossed his arms over his chest and raised a flirting brow. "Yeah, with pepperoni nipples," I muttered.

Bodhi always insisted I say the N-word.

"Ah, babe, you are way too much fun," he said chuckling. I unzipped one of my carriers and unloaded four pizzas. Bodhi opened the top box, moaning. Snagging a quick piece, he motioned for the pledge who had joined us to take the pizzas from my arms while I quickly unzipped the other two carriers, revealing eight more pizzas. Bodhi pulled a wad of twenties from his back pocket, counting them out. When I unzipped my money bag to make change, Bodhi held up his hand. "Keep the change, babe."

More of that megawatt smile. "Thanks," I said, zipping the twenties inside. "How goes it at Double XL?"

"NC-17 as usual. Wanna stay?"

Bodhi grabbed me by the forearm, dragging me across the threshold before I could issue a refusal. I was greeted with the

smell of whiskey and weed. “Celebration?” I said, making an exaggerated sniffing sound.

“Nah, must be the sage incense. We’re trying to purify the place.”

“You might want to start with a priest or at least a dose of antibiotics.”

Bodhi pitched his head back, laughing and throwing an arm around my shoulder.

Double XL was full of its regular crowd, but I still felt as uncomfortable as a pig at the county fair. On one hand, you were going to get stared at and assessed for your attributes. On the other, you would go straight to the slaughterhouse. Neither option spelled long-term security.

A female voice snorted behind us. Turning toward the hiss, I focused on Amnesty Stine. Amnesty and I were opposites, antonym after bloody antonym. With coal-black hair and a petite, shapely body, she’d never worked a day in her life. I’d been working since age thirteen, and with all my paychecks combined, I still couldn’t afford her red Ferrari. Bodhi and she had split two months earlier, and there’d been some bad blood. Apparently, they’d hammered out some sort of peace agreement.

“Hi, Amnesty,” I said.

She zeroed in on my shirt, mentally comparing it to her expensive micro mini dress. “Still delivering pizzas?” she said snidely.

“I’m living my best life.”

Bodhi chuckled at my retort, raking his gaze over my red “Embrace Your Ugly” T-shirt. It had a caricature of Rollo’s big head underneath the slogan, throwing a pizza in the air. “Yeah,” he muttered. “About that shirt. It hugs the ugly in all the right places.”

Suddenly, the air was supercharged.

Amnesty was sporting dark shades and a pout, but I could still feel the heat behind them. I shrugged away Bodhi’s compliment and the innuendo intended, but Amnesty didn’t possess that much self-control. Without warning, she parked her lips right on top of Bodhi’s—tongue wrestling like Armageddon was tomorrow.

Bodhi pushed her aside with a grunt, but before he could say anything, Cuba Cummings, Amnesty's best friend, joined us. Per usual, Cuba was dressed in trash-bag slut, wearing some sort of silver wrap she'd made in design class. One of the many fillies in Bodhi's stable, Cuba was the backdrop to Amnesty and Bodhi's breakup. Amnesty didn't care. The two girls notoriously broke girl code on a regular basis, sharing boyfriends—and probably shared some other things that a only a medical dictionary could define too.

"Hey, DDD-Darcy," Cuba slurred. "Did you bring any Brazil nuts?"

Here's an FYI for you. I worked at a pizza shop. Brazil nuts were not on the menu. "Just pizza this time," I told her.

Cuba unloaded a *hmpf*, like I should be fired on the spot.

"One of the main reasons I benched her after two dates," Bodhi leaned over and muttered in my direction. "Not a lot going on between the ears. Plus, I think she has a drinking problem."

Cuba was making love to a red Solo cup, smacking pink gum so violently that the goop occasionally got stuck to her lips. I didn't need to ask what was in her cup either. From my limited time servicing college parties, the drink of choice for girls was vodka. It had zero calories and fit in nicely with their waifish bodies.

After a brief conversation that made no sense, Amnesty and Cuba excused themselves to check their hair and makeup—and honestly, to compete with one another in the mirror. Jealousy took up a lot of oxygen in college life, and Amnesty and Cuba were two narcissists in the making.

"Hey, I gotta get back," I said to Bodhi.

Bodhi's hazel eyes protested, sulking like he was a two-year-old in the midst of a fit. "Then come back after your shift," he offered.

"Can't."

"Can I at least BOGO one of you then?" he flirted.

Bodhi had probably gotten a lot of mileage out of that line in the past, but I didn't do the serial thing. "Now see, you're already

cheating,” I said. “That means you would need two of me, and I don’t like to share.”

Right then was when things got even weirder. Someone yelled, “The floor is lava!” Ah, crap, even I knew you couldn’t stand around when someone told you the floor was hot lava. It was another phenomenon amongst college students and high schoolers these days. Someone told you the floor was lava and you jumped on the nearest object, so you wouldn’t burn alive. Bodhi hooked me around the waist, and we hopped up on the edge of a chair, waiting for the lava to pass.

“Want in on my latest pool?” he asked.

I limped along on my take-home pay as it was, and I only had half a box of cereal left and two cans of chicken noodle soup. Of course, I was in. “Is money green?” I grinned.

My father was a bookie, pre-I’ve-found-Jesus-and-I’m-living-the-good-life and all. It appeared his genetic fail bled over onto me because I had a talent for gambling. My favorite thing to gamble on was college sports...and professional sports...and any other sport that was in season. Bodhi knew that to be true because I’d taken home a one-thousand-dollar pot last weekend.

After I gave Bodhi some cash and signed my name in his book with the Dodgers as a 1.5-point favorite, I headed back to Ugly Pizza. The night was young.



“IT’S DOWN THE STREET,” Rollo muttered.

“Which way?” I asked. Rollo was up to his elbows in flour and did the usual—wave his arm around in the air, thinking my mental ESP would know which area of town he was referring to for my next delivery. “Rollo?” I said. “Is that a right or a left?”

Rollo wiped his forehead on his wrist. “For godsakes, Walker. George Rhodes lives down the street in Holmby Hills. The house is...?” He paused and grunted. “Oh, hell. It’s the blue door...or maybe green? You know, that green that looks like black.”

Lord help me, the man then pointed in the other direction.



Following Rollo's directions could feel like an episiotomy, and right then was a fourth-degree tear. Ephraim came out from behind the counter and grabbed my phone, thumbing the address and directions into my notepad. "I think that's right," he said. "At least that's what was called in. Call me if it isn't."

After I was settled in my car, I read the address to Siri and pulled out onto the road, praying for the best. Holmby Hills was roughly ten-to-fifteen minutes from Ugly Pizza, but believe it or not, I'd never delivered to that particular street. Cranking up late-night talk radio, I listened to conservative and liberal talk show hosts crucify one another Jesus-style while I took two turns Siri said were correct. Thing was, I got trapped behind a three-car pileup, and Siri rerouted me onto the scenic route. By the time all was said and done, I wound up at George Rhodes's door a little over two hours later than when he first placed his order.

*Siri, you whore.*

Maneuvering onto the curb, I slammed the car into park and turned off the engine. Grabbing the pizza, I did a walk-jog that eventually turned into a dead run. It was pitch-black at three a.m., and save for a few street lights, the neighborhood was as dark as the skin on a seal. By the garbage cans on the curb, it was obviously trash day for this part of town.

When I made it to George Rhodes's steps, I stabbed the doorbell, praying the pizza had stayed warm. I'd learned one thing about pizza delivery. The golden rule was that a pizza should never be cold. Another rule? The customer never understood.

I glanced over my shoulder while I waited. One sedan was parked three houses down. When I rang the doorbell in a part-two, the car flipped on its lights, crept forward, and then idled in front of me. The driver behind the wheel had long brown hair and a peculiar smiling grin that left my blood cold. It was the Mona Lisa smile. Out of nowhere, he floored the engine, motoring past me in a blur of speed.

Weird stuff happened on the night shift. Nothing shocked me anymore.

When another punch of the doorbell produced zero results, I

rapped my knuckles one more time. After another round of pounding, the door slightly parted—like a creak in a horror movie where your gut told you not to go inside.

“Aloha?” I said through the crack. “Mister Rhodes? I’m sorry I’m late, but I’ve brought your trip to the islands. Did you place an order for a twelve-inch Hawaiian from Ugly Pizza?” The roar of a television hummed inside. Mister Rhodes didn’t answer. Neither did a Mrs. Rhodes. I hit the doorbell to punctuate my words and then like an idiot stepped inside. My heart thrashed in my chest because if George Rhodes didn’t materialize, then that meant no tip for Darcy Walker.

Opening that door had been a dumb idea from the get-go. I spotted a man to my left in a brown plaid recliner. His head was slumped forward like he’d fallen asleep, but the angle of his body was too awkward. Like some force had surprised him, and he didn’t know how to respond.

“Mister Rhodes,” I said. “Are you okay?”

Three more steps closer, and I clocked on the reason for his silence. He’d been shot in the back of the head, blood oozing down his dark hair and staining his white golf shirt in a constant trickle. I watched the pizza drop from my hands in slow-mo and land on the floor in a quiet splat. This wasn’t a pixelated image. This was the real deal. For a moment, I was stunned. Couldn’t move. Breathe. Anything. But then my Florence Nightingale kicked into high gear, and I sprinted to Mr. Rhodes, wondering if I needed to perform CPR.

*Seriously, is he dead? Like one hundred percent not breathing?*

When I made it to his face, the man had lifeless eyes, like one of those creepy china dolls. Make that a lifeless eye, to be exact. The bullet had exited through an eye socket, and what was left of his face smelled like rusty iron. I feared I’d vomit, and the stress alone of the will-I or won’t-I situation almost brought my breadstick up.

*Breathe, Darcy,* I coached myself. *Breathe.* With shaking hands, I pulled out my phone and dialed my landlord—who just

happened to be Lincoln Taylor, my boyfriend's grandfather, and homicide detective captain in the LAPD, West LA Division.

"Are you on your way home?" he asked in a sleepy voice on pickup. "I hate this night shift work, dear. I know you're an adult and can make your own decisions, but the cop in me—"

I interrupted, telling him what happened, where I was, adding on visual effects and a hiccupy voice because I still wasn't sure I wasn't going to hurl.

"You found a dead body?" he verified.

"I did, and I'm pretty sure it's a one-eighty-seven." One-eighty-seven (187) was code for murder.

"Did you call it in?"

"I called you first. I mean, you *are* God, right?"

A sigh. "Can you tell if he lived there alone?"

"Not really. I can't get past the blood and brain matter."

A heavier sigh. "Call it in," he murmured, "and I'll get a warrant, so we can search the premises. I'll be there soon."

My life was a little more boring than high school where I'd been shot at, stabbed, held hostage, and kidnapped—stumbling upon so many dead bodies during the process that I'd quit keeping a tally. I couldn't deny the irony of finding Mr. Rhodes, but as much as solving crime intrigued me, finding a man with one eye was not an experience I was dying to repeat—no pun intended.

### 3 GINGERS

Lincoln said it would be roughly twenty-five to thirty minutes before he and the detectives made it to the scene—but that first responders could arrive sooner. Lincoln punctuated his words with a don't-get-in-trouble order that I interpreted as, *Don't do Darcy things until I arrive*. All my ventures were filtered through the how-not-to-get-caught benchmark anyway, so after I phoned Rollo, I used my downtime wisely and did what I did best...snoop.

Lincoln had placed an emergency medical kit inside my glove compartment my first night on the job, and it contained a set of latex medical gloves. Not wanting to leave my DNA on the personal effects in Rhodes's home, I hurried back to my car and slid my fingers inside the rubber gloves, grabbing the stun gun hidden underneath my seat for protection. Once back inside the home, I performed a quick walk-through upstairs to verify no one else was present who feasibly could be bleeding out. Verifying the only victim was George Rhodes, I ventured back to the first floor.

There was no sign of a forced entry. Windows looked fine. TV still in operation. Back door was locked. No sign of a struggle anywhere. To the side of the television set, a bullet had splintered the wall from the exit wound, decorating the TV and bullet hole with blood and brain matter. His cell phone was on an end table

next to an opened bag of Cheetos. Sorrow washed over me when I thought of Mr. Rhodes. All the man was trying to do was have a snack and watch *Let's Make a Deal*.

Other than the one bullet hole, I didn't see anything else odd, so I moved to the kitchen, opening his pantry. Cereal on the top shelf. Corn next to the beans. Beans beside a can of asparagus. The man had alphabetized his canned goods. Impressive. Opening the cabinets and drawers, the plates and utensils indicated he was the only one who had lived there, having two of everything—one to eat with and one that probably spent some time in the dishwasher. Nothing struck me as odd...my findings indicating he was more than likely single and anal retentive.

Working in food services, I was constantly cleaning up messes in the kitchen and in the dining area. Since I obviously had no qualms about getting dirty, I ventured outside to the empty street, heading straight for Rhodes' garbage. If a homeowner left trash on the curb, it could be searched without a warrant. So I planned to disassemble and toss everything back in the bag—no harm done. I had to be careful, though, because the first responders dispatched had to be close by. And biggest hurdle to avoid? I didn't want to get kicked out of the academy before I even stepped one foot inside the doors.

I didn't know what type of person Rhodes was. Was he a user? Would I find syringes inside his garbage that I could accidentally nick myself on? Hurrying back to the street, I pulled the neck of my T-shirt up over my nose, clicked the flashlight on my phone, and untwisted the tie on the black Glad bag, gingerly placing a hand inside. Despite having a fully stocked pantry, George Rhodes was the king of takeout. Right on top were boxes of Chinese and a bag from McDonald's. Underneath that were the remains of a Wendy's value meal and a half eaten frosty. He was probably like the rest of America—good intentions to make his own meals but then the lack of time and overall weariness made takeout the better option. Other than food, there were a few paper bills. Coupons that had expired. Just your everyday, normal trash. Right when I almost threw in the towel, I stumbled across a birth

certificate for a Geoffrey Reynolds, and below that was a 9mm gun.

Odd combo to place in your garbage.

I clicked several photographs of each with my iPhone, wondering who Geoffrey Reynolds was to George Rhodes.

When I heard a siren in the distance, I quickly placed everything back in the bag, retying it. The moment I almost removed my gloves, I kicked a parking ticket that had fallen into the gutter. Picking up the LA-issued invoice, I frowned. The ticket had a time and date stamp of two thirty-four a.m., issued to a black Honda a few minutes earlier. It wasn't weird to get a parking ticket in LA, but on this particular street, it was clearly denoted via signage that you could only park on one side—and the Honda, according to the ticket, had been on the opposite one. The license plate number was a standard sequence from the county of San Bernardino. What was a car from Big Bear doing in front of George Rhodes' address? Could that have been Mona Lisa Smiler? Or was Mona Lisa Smiler just doing his thing and that ticket had been for someone else?

That answer just could turbocharge the investigation.

---

LINCOLN TAYLOR and Detective Guy Adler arrived, along with two squad cars, a coroner's van, and forensic investigators. Lincoln was a striking man at six two or so with graying-brown hair and mocha-colored eyes—eye candy for a female who liked an older man. On a murder scene, though, he was as imposing as the man who operated the guillotine. He was sharp, all-business, and legendary for eating more lead than anyone on the force and somehow surviving. Adler, however, was legendary for other reasons. He was giant-big, had a loud mouth, and talked down to anyone he believed was beneath him. His personality didn't run hot and cold. It was cold all the time. Unfortunately, he was a ginger. And where I normally liked a good ginger, on Detective Adler it only reminded me that he didn't have a soul.

“Jesus,” Adler cursed, snorting with impatience. “Can Gregg ever make it to a scene on time?” As if on cue, Detective Sara Gregg pulled up to the curb and parked her car, exiting in a strong, confident walk. Detective Gregg was an attractive brunette and had just had a baby. I thought she was doing pretty darn good for being a working mom and frankly had only arrived ten minutes after Adler.

“Sorry for the delay, Captain Taylor,” she said, handing Lincoln a search warrant she’d obtained from a judge. “My husband is out of town, and I had to wait for my mom to watch the baby.”

“No need for an apology,” Lincoln murmured with a slight smile. “Normally the night shift detectives handle this, but I wanted it to go straight to you two.”

Los Angeles Police Department had detectives who only worked the night shift. They would process a scene, interview witnesses, and then place the case on the appropriate desk for their daytime counterparts to take over and hopefully solve. They merely were the first look and never the closer. Lincoln, as he said, called Adler and Gregg to the scene because of his personal involvement with me—bypassing the night shift altogether.

“So how is your little girl?” Lincoln asked Gregg.

“Growing like a weed, sir,” she said proudly.

Lincoln made a rueful noise, rolling his neck around until it cracked. “Enjoy it now,” he murmured. “They grow up too soon, and then they have opinions. And then they decide they want to work at night delivering pizzas, and they find out it’s not all pizza and wings.”

Lincoln threw a tired eye my way as he snapped on rubber gloves.

Adler frowned at Lincoln’s affinity for Gregg and me and stalked inside. Even though I would’ve expected Lincoln to dismiss me, he allowed me to accompany him and the others into George Rhodes’s home. Sliding my hands into the rubber gloves Gregg gave me, after I walked them through the one-two-three of finding the body, a CSI tapped into Rhodes’s cell phone, tracking

that he had phoned two pizza delivery joints that evening—Olive Eye and Rollo's Ugly Pizza. Odd.

"Where's the OE pizza, Lincoln?" I asked, referring to the first order Rhodes had made. "His iPhone said he ordered a twelve-inch Hawaiian at eleven-thirty p.m., an hour before he phoned Ugly Pizza. And it wasn't in his trash."

Lincoln grabbed my gaze but said nothing.

"And how would you know anything about the vic's trash?" Detective Adler questioned.

I had diarrhea of the mouth. Seriously. Detective Gregg glanced at her shoes and snickered. "I went through it," I admitted. "Find the delivery driver, find the shooter. Or at least an eyewitness."

Lincoln rubbed the gray stubble on his chin. "So the vic called Ugly Pizza because he got tired of waiting on the pizza from Olive Eye to arrive?"

"That's what I'm thinking," I explained. "His iPhone said he called us around twelve-thirty, but I didn't arrive until a few minutes before three. That was a little over three hours from the time he first placed an order with our competitor. So where did that delivery driver go? Did he not show at all? Did he walk in on something? Did he kill the guy himself?"

"So the delivery driver thought, 'What the hell, I'm going to drop off a pizza and kill my customer at the same time?'" Detective Adler said snidely.

"We have to consider all angles," Detective Gregg said in my defense.

I didn't consider myself a person who held grudges, but for Adler, I just might make an exception. "If not, then that driver saw something," I said to him, trying to prove my point. "Listen, I drive for a living. You're after that tip, no matter what. The only thing that would keep you from delivering an order was Jesus Christ's return or stumbling upon a murder...or maybe even being the shooter yourself."

Olive Eye wasn't an all-night establishment. That feasibly meant the order to Mr. Rhodes had been their last delivery of the



evening since they closed at midnight. Lincoln told Detective Gregg to check in with the owner as soon as it opened for business.

We traveled to the curb and watched a CSI pilfer through the trash. As expected, he went straight for the 9mm. “This gun doesn’t appear to have been fired,” he said, turning it over and gazing up to Lincoln, “but I’ll check the vic’s hands for residue once we get back to the lab just to make sure. And there’s no serial number either, Captain,” he said. “It’s been scratched off.”

Detective Adler looked at Lincoln. “I’ll check the hospital logs to see if any gunshot wounds were admitted in the last hour or so.”

Hospitals were required by law to report gunshot and stab wounds, but it was up to the victim to file a report and/or charges. If he or she didn’t file, then the police didn’t investigate. My guess was Mr. Rhodes wasn’t going to file since his heart wasn’t beating, and he didn’t have half a face.

“Somebody who just put a bullet in the back of someone’s head didn’t go to the hospital. If he was hit, he probably chewed the slug out himself,” I muttered, but I didn’t expect anyone to hear.

“Aren’t you going to send her home?” Detective Adler snapped. “What is she? Nineteen? Twenty? She’s just a kid.”

Lincoln slowly raised his head, his eyes on fire, chin jutting out in a deliberate taunt. Lincoln had a temper that could clear a room on impact, and by the swallow in Adler’s throat, he realized he’d just pulled the pin out of the grenade. “Darcy lives with me,” Lincoln said icily. “She’ll stay as long as I say she can.”

*Interpretation? I’m your bloody boss.*

“And as far as the ‘kid’ comment,” I dumbly added, “age is just a number. I’m more than capable of doing your job.” *A-hole.* “Let me know when you want to swap résumés.”

Adler took a beat to chew those words around in his evil, little brain. When he spoke, his words were as cold as the Arctic Circle. “Aren’t you the cocky little thing,” he sneered.

Lincoln said nothing, but the bristle coming from him felt like

needles to the skin. “Cocky has kept me alive, asshole,” I said in a rare curse.

A muscle in Adler’s jaw worked, and I gave him a fake, cheesy smile.

When he finally strode away, I imagined him stung by a million killer bees. “Your wheels are turning,” Lincoln said softly. “Want to put those thoughts into words?”

“Gingers don’t have souls,” I muttered.

Lincoln chuckled, giving me a side hug and kiss on the top of the head, not caring if anyone saw the public display of affection. “Ah, dear. On your assessment of Adler, I do concur.”

Detective Adler was a perfect candidate for a throat punch. It came as no surprise that his wife had recently left him.

“I *did* like how you defended yourself,” Lincoln continued. “You’re going to have to work that much harder than everyone else being a woman in this field, but if I’ve ever had faith in anyone, it’s you.”

Lincoln’s buzz phrase to every police officer he mentored was to “stay in your lane.” Officers were only to get involved when things didn’t resolve themselves on their own. I wasn’t the greatest student in high school, but I was definitely good with murder... and I was good with people making me feel small. Ergo, whatever bullshittiness someone like Adler dished out, I was more than capable of dealing with. While Adler and Gregg talked to the CSIs who were loading Rhodes into the coroner’s van, Lincoln pulled me aside, asking my take.

“Shootings statistically occur between people who know one another,” I said while we walked the perimeter of the home. “Maybe Rhodes had planned to eat a pizza with someone... someone who was at the home, but something all of a sudden went bad. We know he was alive at twelve-thirty because he called us, so what happened between that time and when I walked through the door? All I know is there was a huge window of time where Rhodes wanted some pizza. And trust me, hunger can make people do some crazy things.”

“It was a small pizza for two people,” he said.

“True, but why leave your front door open? Especially when the backdoor was locked?”

“Maybe he forgot.”

“Possibly, but the guy was anal retentive,” I said. “There wasn’t clutter anywhere, you know? So maybe the shooter either walked in through the front door like I did...”

“Or?” Lincoln said, baiting me.

“Or the shooter somehow procured a key, slipped inside, and shot Rhodes during Hi-Lo.”

I could feel Lincoln smiling in the dark. “Good work, dear. Now we just need to uncover why someone would want to kill George Rhodes. We figure that out, then we find the shooter.”

*LA. An endless conga line of crime.*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.J. lives in Cincinnati with her husband, two daughters, an ADD dog, and a spoiled hamster burial site in her backyard. When she's not writing, she's reading, binge-watching the heck out of some show or eavesdropping-slash-creeping on those around her. And maybe searching the skies for aliens whenever the mood hits.

For more books and updates, connect with her on social media

and at:

<https://www.ajlape.com>



ALSO BY A. J. LAPE

DARCY WALKER  
TEENAGE SLEUTH THRILLERS

Grade A Stupid

No Brainer

100 Proof Stud

DEFCON Darcy

Foolproof

DARCY WALKER INVESTIGATIONS

Side Hustle

Gut Check

Ride or Die

Medusa Effect

5 Pounds of Pressure

Heist & Seek

White Noise

RIVERA & GUTIERREZ SERIES

Vice

Vice Versa

Of Vice & Men

Vice or Consequences





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To all those “wind beneath my wings” people (Debbie, Heather, Melanie, Jeff, Lavinia, Angela, and Virginia), thank you for sticking around for another release. I couldn’t do it without you; And to all those in law enforcement who allowed me to bend your ear. Thank you so much for your patience and expertise; And finally to the Lord, fans, and my family...I love you beyond words. Thank you for the endless support.

