

Chapter 1

In the prophetic analogy of the bug and the windshield, sometimes you *are* the unfortunate insect, but *hot damn*, sometimes you get to be the glass.

—*Chrissy McMullen PhD at her most optimistic*

“You shouldn’t do that.” Lieutenant Jack Rivera looked titillatingly handsome and atypically relaxed as he watched me from across the table. His left arm was draped over the back of the leather booth.

It was Thursday night, nearly the end of the work week, and the evening classes I was taking in forensic psychology wouldn’t begin again until April. It was practically a holiday.

The Oakenshield, where we were dining, was a lovely establishment with acres of polished wood and centuries of old-world charm. I had consumed enough butter-drenched lobster to keep me from wanting to inhale the restaurant’s snappy tablecloth, but not so much that I felt like an overfed tuna. I’d even left a morsel of light-as-air popover unmolested. Such was my auspicious degree of classy self-control. But perhaps the popover’s survival was due primarily to the fact that we had moved on to after-dinner drinks. An old-fashioned Golden Cadillac for each of us. Despite being a low-class cocktail waitress turned sophisticated therapist, or perhaps because of that propitious factoid, I can get behind any beverage that involves more cream than alcohol. Especially since it was the first treat I’d allowed myself in twenty-eight sugar-deprived days. They’d been the longest days of my life, but willpower had prevailed, while my mood, sometimes a bit volatile when my diet is short on glucose, was currently as mellow as my drink.

Ignoring his own high-caloric beverage without breaking a sweat, Rivera watched me in silence. Known by many of the law-abiding denizens of Los Angeles (and by even more of the less lawful ones) as a hard-ass officer with the LAPD, he was wearing a charcoal Brooks Brothers suit coat over a crisp white button-down shirt. Sans tie with a mocha-lite valley of delectable chest visible, he, like the popover, looked good enough to eat.

“What?” I asked, alluding to his earlier question.

“If that’s your best innocent act, you’re never going to make it in the entertainment field, McMullen.”

I amped up the innocence, adding a couple watts of *who, me?*

He chuckled with deep appreciation. “You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

I gave him the coy suggestion of a smile. “This?” I asked, then licked a droplet of cream from the rim of my cocktail glass.

Rivera’s full lips quirked. He has the mouth of a fallen angel and eyes like Lucifer himself, while the rest of him looks like something chiseled by a crafty deity with something to prove. “Yeah,” he said, “that.”

I licked again, then glanced at him through my well-enhanced lashes and asked, “How come?”

Shifting close, Rivera rested his elbows on the table between us. “Because irresolute vest guy over there”—he nodded toward a corpulent patron in a beleaguered waistcoat with straining buttons—“is starting to drool and I don’t want to have to book him for lewd and lascivious. Or break out the defibrillator.”

I grinned, rested my nearly naked back against the cushion and gave the dark lieutenant my full, sultry attention. I looked sexy and I knew it. I’d borrowed this little concoction that some might call a dress from Brainy Laney Butterfield. She’s better known to her adoring fans by her stage name, Patricia Ruocco, or as Hippolyta the indomitable Amazon Queen, who vanquishes everything from scantily clad hotties to griffons on her weirdly popular TV drama.

Tri-weekly runs along the relatively tranquil streets of Sunland, capped by a bout with a nasty, but let’s be honest, *fortuitous* stomach bug, had made it just possible for me to shimmy into the slinky size six. I was shod in three-inch, secondhand-but-still-classy Manolo Blahniks, and for once even my hair had decided against making me look like a twit. It remained tidily piled atop my head, like twisted threads of various precious metals. Life looked good. I looked better.

“‘Irresolute’?” I asked and raised a recently groomed eyebrow.

“I happen to know that big words . . . with the addition of top-shelf Italian liqueurs . . .” He nodded toward my drink. “Make you hopelessly susceptible to my charms.”

“And how about you, Lieutenant?” I asked. “How’s *your* self-control?”

He let his gaze dip toward my carefully displayed décolletage. “Where you’re concerned?”

I resisted squirming. Squirming is decidedly unclassy. “That’s what I had in mind.”

“I thought I answered that question a couple hours ago.”

“Did you?” I asked, pretending to have forgotten the pre-dinner prelude that had begun in my cute little Tudor. It had continued in his Jeep and, if the evening remained on its ill-advised but not unheard-of trajectory, might very well sidetrack us into the nearest restroom.

No one ever said the lieutenant and I were sexually incompatible. *Mature* was also an adjective rarely used in regard to us as a couple.

“You forget already?” Rivera asked and reached for my hand.

His fingers were warm, slightly rough at the tips. I imagined them against more attention-starved areas of my anatomy. “I’m not sure,” I said. “Was there a lot of heavy breathing?”

He kissed my fingertips. My heartbeat hitched a little in that well-exposed décolletage.

“It was hard to hear,” he said, smoothing the backs of his nails down my wrist. I shivered. “Over the screams.”

The portly guy in the unfortunate plaid vest was watching us like we were a porn flick. I felt myself blush. “I didn’t scream.”

“Are you sure?” Rivera’s fingernails had reached the bend in my arm, dwelled there, hovering.

“Kinda.” My voice sounded weak.

“Must have been me, then. But . . .” He shrugged, shifted closer. “What do you expect? I’m a sucker for women with more sass than sense. Besides, you were wearing even less than you are now. And you know who looks great naked?”

“Me?” The word hung breathily between us.

His hot brandy eyes stared into mine, suggesting the unspeakable.

I cleared my throat. “That was a real question,” I admitted.

His brows rose a little.

“Is it me?” I asked.

His chuckle was deep and quiet, sending a swift arrow of lust shivering through me. “Yeah,” he said and kissed my palm with slow attentiveness. “It’s you.”

I wriggled, unclassy but unavoidable. “Maybe we should get the check.”

“I want to give you something first.”

Sensing the sultry approach of sugar, I glanced to my left. A cute Latino waiter was carrying a slice of cake big enough to have its own zip code.

“Oh!” I stared at it, salivary glands at full alert. “I really shouldn’t.”

“It’s not dessert,” Rivera said.

I pulled my gaze from the platter-sized treat. “No?”

“No,” he admitted, and abandoning my hand, reached inside his suit coat.

“Well, hello,” someone said.

I zipped my attention to the opposite side of the table. The woman standing there was tall, blond, buxom, and gorgeous. If there’s such a thing as a quadfecta, she’d nailed it.

Rivera dropped his hand, placing both palms on the table.

“Gerald.” She gazed at him, managing to look superior and strangely hungry at the same time. Her electric blue dress squeezed her like a cobra. Ten-gallon boobs spilled out the top, mile-high legs from the bottom. “You look good.”

Something sizzled in the lieutenant’s eyes. To say Jack Rivera has a past is like saying crocodiles have teeth. But the past was just that, and we were doing well together. Had been for weeks. He’d been attentive, considerate, and available. And me? I look good naked.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” she asked.

A muscle jumped in Rivera’s jaw. “This is a private conversation.”

She smiled as she turned toward me, eyes brittle as the vanishing glaciers. “I’m Veronica VanBurren. And you are?”

“What are you doing here, Velvet?” Rivera asked.

She laughed as she looked back at him. “No one calls me Velvet anymore, darling. I haven’t been to the Snuggle in ages. Everyone calls me Roni now. Even William. I can’t wait to tell him I saw you. Or . . . you know what would be even better? You should stop by and see him. Wouldn’t that be great? I could have Constanza make us a little lunch. Like old times. The three amigos.”

“We were never amigos, Velvet.”

“Oh my God,” she said and laughed. “Don’t tell me.” She tilted her head a little, like a carnivorous bird at the sight of a juicy night crawler. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous.”

The first niggle of anger sizzled through me. Sure, I’m a secure, well-educated individual, but sometimes it’s best not to come between me and a guy who says I look good, naked or otherwise. “Listen . . . Velvet,” I said and rose

to my feet. The movement was smooth and elegant. Or maybe I bumped the table a little and threatened to spill my drink. "It's ever so nice of you to stop by, but maybe—"

"What the hell are you?" She raked me with her ice-blue eyes. "His nanny?"

That niggle of anger amped up a little. "And what are you?" I asked. "A hooker?"

"Is that what he—" she began, then pivoted toward Rivera. "Is that what you told her, you son of a bitch? I'm a serious actress! An actress you couldn't keep your hands—"

"Veronica," Rivera said, and standing, reached for her arm. "Maybe we should take this outside."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" she asked and yanked out of his reach, diction deteriorating as her anger amped up. "Always shuffling me outta your life." She scorned me with her eyes again. "But I'm the one had your kid, aren't I? I'm the one had your boy."

The world went silent, went flat, went crazy. I remained absolutely still, not breathing.

"What are you talking about?" Rivera's voice was a low, edgy bass.

"Don't pretend you don't know."

"What don't I know?" The bass notes quivered dangerously.

She smiled. "Maybe you better stop by, Gerald. Little Jerry's gonna turn one on Saturday. You can have a piece of cake," she said, then sashayed away.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he snarled, but she continued to snake between the tables.

"She's talking about your child." My voice sounded a little hollow. A little eerie. "I believe his name is Jerry."

Rivera turned back toward me, expression shattered, as if he might have forgotten I was there. But he rallied.

"Listen, McMullen—"

"Is it yours?"

"Let's just—"

"Did you sleep with her?" I asked.

"That's not—"

"Did you fucking sleep with her?" I may have whispered the words. Conversely, I may have screamed them.

He reached for me. "Don't get—"

I slapped his hand away.

"It was a long time ago," he said.

"And that makes it okay?" I rasped. "That makes it just hunky dory?"

"We were seeing other people."

"What?"

"The doctor. What's his face. You were dating Dr. Snooze."

"I was *dating* someone, so you thought . . . Huh!" I laughed, but it didn't sound like I thought it was funny. More like I was about to morph into something large and green and fairly destructive. "So you thought you'd go ahead and have a *baby* with that . . . that—"

"Listen. We don't know—"

That's when I grabbed the nearest utensil from the table and held it in front of me like a bayonet. "Touch me," I snarled, "and you'll be the only officer in the LAPD short one hand."

"Put that down," he ordered.

"How many times?" I growled.

"What?"

"How many times did you sleep with her?"

"That doesn't—"

"If you tell me it doesn't matter, I'm going to cut your tongue out."

"With a lobster pick?"

I glanced at my weapon of choice, returned my attention to him. "Yeah."

He exhaled, careful, slow. "I don't think we actually—"

"And if you tell me you didn't actually *sleep*, I'm going to shove your tongue down your lying throat."

He stood his ground, canted his head. His eyes gleamed, almost as if this entire episode was somehow entertaining. As if I were amusing him. "Just for the record, is there a scenario where you're not planning to lop off some part of my anatomy?"

"Not if you laugh," I warned. "One chuckle . . . one titter . . . one fucking grin and I'll . . ." My voice betrayed me, wavering with emotion. "I'll rip your heart out of your chest."

"Come on, McMullen." He sighed, deep and heavy. "Calm down. Let's talk about this," he said and reached out again.

I slashed at him, ripping his sleeve. He jerked back, crashed into the waiter behind him. Dishes clattered, but I barely noticed. Insanity rushed in. I leapt forward, slashing again.

“God damn it!” he snarled and came at me.

I spread my Manolos and growled a threat, but just then someone grabbed Rivera from behind.

“You will let her be.”

“What the hell!” Rivera rasped, but he didn’t struggle. “She’s the one with the lobster pick!”

“Are you well?” The waiter who’d caught Rivera’s arms was a couple inches shorter than his captive, but what he lacked in height, he made up for in unadvised tenacity. “Are you okay, senorita?”

Maybe it was a stranger’s concern that opened the gates for sanity. Maybe I finally realized I was mere inches from slicing one of L.A.’s finest with a lobster pick. And maybe it was the fact that I was wearing an original Christian Dior. Whatever the reason, I dropped the pick and stumbled like a drunken debutant from the restaurant.