

THE VENTURI EFFECT by Sage Webb

Excerpt

Chapter 1

Carny

Red metal boxes lined the wood-railed tourist boardwalk, giving children access to fish food if the kids could finagle quarters from parents wilted and forlorn in the triple-digit Gulf Coast heat. With the food, kids could create great frenzies of red drum, snook, spotted sea trout, or whatever fish species gathered at the boardwalk's pilings in agitated silver vortices. Devlin Winters lifted her ballcap and wiped a sleeve across her brow. She favored long-sleeved t-shirts for just this reason—their mopping properties . . . and to protect her from the Galveston Bay sun in its unrelenting effort to grill her and the other boardwalk barkers. In the two years she'd been on the boardwalk, she'd never fed the fish.

A kid stopped beside one of the boxes.

“Can I have a quarter, mommy?” the boy asked.

He looked about eight or nine, though Devlin had little interest in guessing accurately the ages of the pint-sized patrons fueling her income stream.

“I'm not sure I have one,” the mom replied.

She appeared a bit younger than Devlin, maybe late twenties.

Once upon a time, Devlin would have looked at a mother like that and made a snide remark about crib lizards and dead ends, but nine bucks an hour in the sun makes it awfully hard for a carny to judge others. Lacking a more interesting subject, Devlin watched the woman paw through a backpack-sized purse. The chick produced a quarter and handed it to the kid, who dropped it into the box's payment slot and ground the dial, catching in his miniature palm a limited portion of the fish food that spilled out of the machine when he lifted the metal flap. The majority of the pellets rained down onto the wooden boardwalk planks, bounced, and disappeared through the cracks between the planks.

Devlin fancied she could hear the tiny fish-food BBs hitting brown water: plink, plink, plink. Once upon another time, when she was still at Sondheim Baker, but toward the end, she would go outside in the middle of the day. Instead of sitting at her desk, drafting appellate briefs for the Seventh Circuit, she would ride the elevator down to La Salle, down seven hundred feet of glass and stainless steel and terribly expensive architecture. She would drop down those elevator cables at random times, at times rich, successful attorneys should have been at their desks. And she

would turn left out of that great glass building the color of the sky and walk over to the river, that nothing-like-the-Styx river that mankind had turned back on itself, contrary to nature.

She would stand and look down into the water, which was sometimes emerald, sometimes the color of jeans before they are ever washed. Once or twice, she had reached into her purse (expensive purses, Magnificent Mile purses from Burberry and Gucci and Hermès) and she had dug around until she'd found a penny. She'd dropped the penny into the river and, even now, on the sauna-hot boardwalk with the whistle of the kid-sized train behind her and the pulses of unimpressive pop music overhead, she was sure she could hear those pennies hit the Chicago River, hit and sink down, down, and farther down.

Plink. Plink. Pli—

“You want to try this one?”

The fish-feeding entertainment had run its course and the mother stood in front of the water-gun game Devlin guarded. She gestured toward Devlin and the row of stools in front of their narrow-barreled water guns.

“Is it hard?” The kid looked up at his mom, and the mom turned to Devlin.

“He can do it, right?” she asked. “I mean, he can figure it out, right?”

“Sure, it's easy.” Devlin lifted her cap for another mop across her hairline, and then wiped perspiration away from her eyes under her sunglasses. “It's fun, little dude,” she said to the kid in his obviously secondhand clothes.

She wanted to care, wanted to be “affable” or whatever it is a carny should be toward summer's ice-cream-eating cash-crop flux of kids. But wanting alone, without effort, is never enough.

The mom held out a five-dollar bill.

“You both wanna do it? I gotta have more than one person to run it for a prize.” Devlin rubbed the top of her right flip flop and foot against her left calf.

“Oh,” the woman said, “I wasn't planning to play. I'm no good at these things.”

“Um,” Devlin stepped out of the shade of the game's nook and cast her eyes up and down the boardwalk, “we'll find some more kids.” She took the woman's money without looking away from the walkway and the beggarly seabirds.

A young couple, likely playing hooky from jobs in Houston, held the hands of a girl sporting jet-black pigtails and lopsided glasses.

“Step right up, princess. You wanna win a unicorn, right?” Devlin reached back into her game nook and snatched a pink toy from the wall of unicorns, butterflies, bees, and unlicensed lookalikes of characters from movies Devlin had never heard of. She dangled the thing in the girl's direction.

“Would you like to play, *habibi*?” The mom jiggled the girl's arm.

“Tell ya what.” Devlin turned to the mom. “The whole family can play for five bucks. We're just trying to get some games going, give away some prizes to these cuties.” She turned back to the first mother. “And don't worry, I'll give him three games for the fiver.”

“Hear that, Vince? You'll get to play a few times. Is that cool?”

Vince picked at his crotch. Devlin looked away.

“Yes, we’ll all play,” the second mother said. The dad pulled a twenty out of a pocket and Devlin started to make change while Vince’s mom hefted Vince onto a stool.

“Just a five back,” the father said. “We’ll play a few times.”

“Sure thing,” Devlin replied. Then she raised her voice to run through the rules of the game, to explain how the water guns spraying and hitting the targets would raise plastic boats in a boat race to buzzers at the top of the game contraption. She offered some tired words of encouragement, got nods from everyone, and counted down. “Three, two, one.”

She pushed the button and the game loosed a bell sound across the boardwalk.

A guy in waiter’s livery hurried past, hustling toward one of the boardwalk’s various restaurants, with their patios overlooking the channel and Galveston Bay. He’d be serving people margaritas and gimlets in just a few more steps and minutes. Devlin wanted a gimlet.

She drew a deep breath, turned back to her charges. “Close race here, friends.”

An ’80s-vintage Hunter sailboat slid past in the channel, leaving Galveston Bay and making its way back to one of the marinas up the waterway on Clear Lake.

When Devlin turned back to her marksmen, the girl’s mother’s boat had almost reached the buzzer.

“Looks like we’ve got a leader here. Come on, madam. You’re almost there.”

Devlin checked her watch. She’d be off in less than an hour. She’d be back on her own boat fifteen minutes after that, with an unopened bottle of Bombay Sapphire and a net full of limes rocking above the galley sink.

The buzzer blared.

“Looks like we have a winner. Congratulations, madam.” Devlin clapped three times. “Now would you like a unicorn, a butterfly, or,” Devlin pulled a four-inch-tall creature from the wall, not knowing how to describe it, “this little guy?” She held it out for the woman’s inspection.

“*Habibti*, you pick.” The mom patted her daughter’s back. The kid didn’t say anything, just pointed at the butterfly.

“Butterfly it is, beautiful.” Devlin unclipped the toy from the wall of plush junk and handed it to the girl. “Well, we’ve got some competition for this next one, folks, now that you’re all warmed up. Take a breather. We’ll start the next game when you’re ready.”

“Can I try?” A boy pulled at a broad-shouldered man’s hand, leading the guy toward the row of stools. It was hard to tell parentage with these kids and their mixed-up step- and half- and melded-in-other-ways families, and with this one, the kid’s dark curls and earnest eyes contrasted with the dude’s Nordic features and reminded Devlin of a roommate she’d had in undergrad, a girl from Haiti who’d taught Devlin about *pikliz*. Devlin hadn’t thought about Haitian food in ages. She decided she would google it later and see what she could find in Houston. A drive to discover somewhere new to eat would do her good.

Any chance at plantains and *pikliz* would have to wait, though. The kid and the dude now stood in front of Devlin. Ultra-dark sunglasses hid the guy’s eyes, and a ballcap with a local yacht brokerage’s logo embroidered on it cast a shadow over his face. Devlin cocked her head. She

narrowed her eyes and hoped her own sunglasses were doing as good a job of being barriers. He reminded her of—

“Still time to add another player?” The dude pulled out a wallet and handed Devlin a ten.

“Sure,” she said. “Is this for both of you? You should give it a try, too. This’ll get you both in on the next two games.”

She didn’t wait for confirmation. She shoved the money in the box beside her control board of buzzer buttons and waved the guy and his kid toward stools on the far side of the now-veteran players already seated.

“Uh, sure,” the guy said, putting a hand on the kid’s back and guiding him to a seat.

Running through the rules again, Devlin envisioned those gimlets awaiting her. With Bombay Sapphire dancing before her, she counted down and then pushed the button to blast the bell and launch the game. The buzzer over the newcomer father’s boat’s track rang moments later. What kind of scummy guy just trounces a kid like that? Devlin rolled her eyes behind the obscuring lenses.

“Looks like our new guy is the winner, ladies and gentlemen. Now, would you like a unicorn, a butterfly, or this little dude?” Devlin again proffered the hard-to-describe creature, walking it over for the fellow to examine.

“What is it?” the guy asked.

Devlin shrugged. “What do you get when you cross an elephant and a rhino?”

The guy’s sunglasses gave away nothing. But something she couldn’t articulate made her feel like he was studying her.

“An ’el-if-I-know,” she said.

Still nothing . . . except that feeling of scrutiny.

“Dude, I’ve got no idea,” she replied to her reflection in the lenses.

“Grant, which one do you want?” The guy turned away and handed the unnamed creature to the kid, and then gestured at the identifiable unicorns and butterflies hanging on the wall over Devlin’s control station.

“Those are for girls,” Grant said, waving at the recognizable plushes on the wall.

“So is this one okay?” The guy patted the thing in the kid’s hand.

Grant wrinkled his nose. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“All right, folks. You’ve all got another game coming here. Competition is fierce. Who’s gonna take this last one?” Devlin strode back to her place at the control board.

“Deep inhale, everyone. Relax. All right, here we go. Three, two, one.” She pushed the starting button.

Up shot the new guy’s boat again. What a bastard. Poor Grant. This patriarchal showmanship would be worth about five or ten grand at the therapist’s in twenty-five years.

Out in the channel, two jetskis purred past, headed toward the bay. The day’s heat had cracked and the sky hinted at evening. Behind her, the victory whistle sounded. She turned. The dude with the sunglasses sat patting Grant’s shoulder, with Grant’s boat at the top of its track. So the guy wasn’t a complete fool.

“A new winner here, ladies and gentlemen.” She walked to Grant’s stool. “Now, little man, because you’ve won two prizes today, you can trade that one you’ve got and this one you’re going to get for one bigger one. You can pick from these if you want.”

She pointed at a row with only-slightly-bigger caterpillars, ambiguous characters, and a dog in a purple vest.

“That one,” Grant said, pointing at the dog.

“That one it is, good sir.” Devlin retrieved the dog, taking back the first creature and returning it to the wall in the process.

As she retraced her steps to Grant, the dog in her hand, fuzzy pictures coalesced in a fog and mist of bygone memories.

Devlin handed the dog to Grant. “There you go.”

She looked at the guy again, focusing on him for longer than she should have, feeling him perhaps doing the same to her. Yes, she had it right: it was him. She pushed a flyaway strand of bleached hair back into place beneath her cap and turned away.

“Thanks for playing this afternoon, folks,” she called. “Enjoy your evening on the boardwalk.”

The parents gathered their kids, and Devlin walked back toward her control board. Waiting for Grant and *him* to head off down the row of games and rides, she fussed with the cashbox and then lifted her water bottle to her lips. She could feel *him* and the kid lingering, feel them failing to move along, failing to leave her to forget what once was and to focus on thoughts of gimlets at sunset on the deck of a rotten old trawler.

“Um.” His voice sounded low and halting behind her. A vacuum, all heat and silence, followed and then a masculine inhale . . . and then the awkward pause.

He cleared his throat.

“Sorry to interrupt, but are you from Chicago?”