

Slightly Murderous Intent by Lisa Sideris

EXCERPT

The last of my patience dripped onto the concrete floor beneath my feet. My fists clenched, my jaw tightened and my stomach rumbled like the start of an avalanche. I'd officially reached the cracking point.

"Today was V-day for us. Victory with a big fat V."

Los Angeles Senior Deputy District Attorney Bruce Beckman stood at the head of our table, arms raised high. The first two fingers of each hand formed a "V". Meanwhile, everyone's dinner sat in front of them. Everyone's, that is, but mine. All I had was an empty plate and an empty stomach.

"Where's our server?" I whispered. The beach side diner was packed. "Did they run out of food?"

Beckman dropped his pose and glared at me so fiercely, my cheeks glowed from the heat.

"Sorry," I mumbled. What did he expect? His mac n' cheese was half eaten. I licked my lips.

"The case came close to swinging in the opposite direction," Beckman continued. "We couldn't have won today's trial without this guy." Beckman gestured toward the deputy D.A. sitting next to him.

I half stood and peered past the other diners. No sign of our server. "Slacker," I mumbled. I slammed my napkin down beside my plate.

"Have some of mine," Michael whispered. "Please, Corrie."

If anyone else had offered, I would've cleaned his plate in thirty seconds. But Michael was my oldest friend slash newest boyfriend, and I loved him dearly from his dark floppy hair to the Chuck Taylors on his feet. We sat in a crowded hipster restaurant in Santa Monica, a hop, skip and a jump from the sparkling Pacific Ocean. Michael had barely touched his burger, waiting on my dinner with me. His stomach growled right alongside mine.

"Obviously, I picked the right man for the job," Beckman said. "And gave him a few tips. Quite a few, actually." He chuckled.

Weak laughter trickled around the table, followed by a groan. Did that come from me? Beckman shot me his signature scowl. I managed a shadow of an apology, and his attention returned to the man on his left. My hunger pangs took a brief hike while I assessed the object of Beckman's praise. Assistant Deputy D.A. James Zachary flashed a grin. He was a sight for sore eyes. Or any eyes, for that matter.

"Thanks to James," Beckman continued, "defense counsel didn't stand a chance."

Cheers erupted. I clapped and wriggled around in my seat. My stomach rumblings grew even louder. That's what happened when my last meal was breakfast.

“I’ll be back,” I whispered to Michael and shoved away my chair. We sat around a table of five. Three of us were members of the world’s oldest profession. The oldest after toolmakers, farmers, the military and doctors. We were lawyers. I was the only lawyer unaffiliated with the D.A.’s office.

“Wait.” Michael took my hand.

Michael Parris wasn’t a lawyer, but he was the associate dean of the computer science department of a private tech college near downtown L.A. Michael’s lips were moving but shouting voices, clanging dinner plates and background music swallowed up his next words.

“What?” I leaned in closer, sniffing a sweet combo of sandalwood and fresh laundry that made my empty insides tingle.

He wiped his mouth on a napkin and said, “Stay here. I’ll go to the kitchen. Help yourself to my burger while you wait. I promise I won’t return empty-handed.”

“No, you stay. I want to make sure they get my order right.” I touched his shoulder. “Be back soon.”

We locked stares and his hazel eyes softened. “Two minutes. If you’re not back, I’m coming after you.”

I’d insisted my table mates eat without me, figuring my meal was on its way...fifteen minutes ago. I aimed for the kitchen, wading sideways between packed tables when I bumped into our server. She tried to push past, but I blocked the way.

“I’m still waiting,” I told her.

“No, you’re not,” she said. “You got served.”

“Crispy chicken sandwich with spicy slaw and chili cheese fries, hold the onions. It’s not on our table.” I pointed my thumb over my shoulder.

“I brought all the orders out personally.”

“Not mine.”

“You wanna talk to the manager?”

“I demand to talk to the manager.”

She tipped her head and pitched it to one side. “Big Sam’s up front by the cashier.”

I moved out of her path, and she hustled past. I continued my sideways trek, filing between chairs and dodging scurrying servers. Nearly closing time and the place was still hopping. I slowed and looked back at the kitchen. Maybe I’d get somewhere if I talked to the cook. I was about to swivel around when I spotted a manager-type; a stocky guy with a shaved head and goatee, chatting up a group of wannabe diners near the bar.

I headed for him and waited behind the blonde hostess. The cash register drawer popped open with a ping. She plucked wads of bills from beneath the drawer and shoved them into a vinyl bank bag.

“Excuse me,” I said.

She jumped and turned to me, zipping up the bag and pushing it behind her. “Yeah?” Long bangs stabbed at her eyes.

I pitched my chin toward the stocky guy. “That the manager?”

“He owns the place. Big Sam Neely.” Her attention went back to the bag. She unzipped it and continued stuffing bills inside.

I navigated closer to Big Sam and leaned against a pillar, waiting for a chance to butt into the conversation. Meanwhile, a lanky dude in a dark gray hoodie and faded jeans edged his way inside. His clothes were baggy; his hood was up and over his head. Only his nose, mouth and tinted shades were visible. Sunglasses at night weren't unusual in L.A. I stared out at the room. A couple of diners wore shades. The guy in the hoodie flitted past me. He threw out his anchor near the hostess. My heartbeat quickened. The cash drawer still gaped open. I elbowed my way back toward him, half-expecting the guy's hand to dart out and grab the bank bag, but he ignored the money. Instead, he eased forward and stared out toward the back of the diner. My gaze dropped to the lower left side of his jacket. The bottom edge had latched onto the large violin shaped leaf of an ornamental ficus, exposing the top of his jeans. My heart hammered against my chest. The grip of a revolver stuck out of his pocket.