

West of Famous excerpt

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Twenty-two-year-old Martina Ramos awoke on a cold floor that reeked of chemicals and vomit. When she sat up, her head throbbed, and the room rocked so painfully she eased back down. She had specifically asked for non-alcoholic drinks at the club because she hated hangovers and couldn't afford the negative publicity storm from public drunkenness. Miami during spring break meant hundreds of hormonal college coeds were watching her in person and through social media. Staggering and puking in bushes would have damaged her carefully-crafted image.

She regretted her best friend was not with her. Nefi would have kept track of her drinks so no one could slip her alcohol or a roofie. Nefi would have protected her from this hammering in her skull. Nefi would have told those people arguing in the room upstairs to shut up.

She also regretted her boyfriend Oscar was not with her. She sighed. Neither her friends nor her family knew where she was because she couldn't tell them.

Her pulse hammered her temples.

She tenderly rubbed her head and found her hair stiff to the touch and sticking to her forehead. Fearing she had puked on herself, she tucked her arms and legs in and rolled onto her hands and knees. She couldn't tell if she was swaying, or the room was, but she needed it to stop. Forcing her eyes open, she squinted in the dark.

The voices grew louder. What on earth were people arguing about this early in the morning? She expected more civilized behavior than this at a 5-star resort. Enough. Time to complain to management.

She sat up, thumping her head on something. Disoriented and fighting vertigo, she reached over her head where her hand found cold metal tubing, like the underside of a sink. The floor was cold enough to be the bathroom. She'd been hungover before, but passing out on the bathroom floor was a first. She vowed it would be a one-time event. She had to get up to clean up. The room pitched. Her head throbbed.

The shouting upstairs stopped. Finally, peace. She rolled gently onto her back and stared up. The room seemed to amplify her movement. Planting her hands flat at her sides, she waited for

the motion to end. Alcohol dehydrated people. Dehydration led to headaches and hangovers. Water. Get water. To reach the sink she had to stand. Wait. How did she end up under the sink? It had a cabinet under it. Didn't it?

She sighed. She'd stayed in so many hotels the last few weeks she couldn't orient herself in the room without light. How could she reach a light switch without standing?

A hatch in the ceiling flung open. "She's awake," a deep voice announced.

Weirdest. Dream. Ever. Martina gaped through a rectangular hole in the ceiling at ugly work boots connected to dirty pants, and to a loose, wrinkled sweatshirt. The man's face was obscured by a shadow. No one said there would be construction. But then, this was not her real hotel. She groaned. "Wake up. Wake up." She patted her face. Surely, she was stuck in the gauzy fog between sleep and being awake. Her body begged for rest.

The man laughed.

Oh, for pity's sake, she wearied of bizarre dreams. Too tired to resist, she decided to play along and get it over with.

A second man wearing a Black Mask stepped into view. "Climb up."

Climb? Martina glanced around. Sure enough, a metal ladder ended by her leg. She stared at it as if it had materialized by magic on command. Why was the guy wearing a mask in Miami? Painters? Fluids sloshed nearby. Light streaming in from the hatch illuminated tanks, pipes, cables, and a long crankshaft. The rocking motion suddenly made sense. That smell wasn't paint. It was diesel. What the—?

"Now!" Green Mask said. His voice was higher than the other man's and smoker-raspy.

This had to be a dream. Someone put something in her drink. LSD? Cocaine? She struggled to her feet as the drumbeat in her head played faster. "Where am I?" She turned and grabbed the painted metal rung of a ladder and climbed out of the engine hold as carefully as possible in three-inch heels and a tight, red sequined party dress. At least it wasn't a naked-in-public dream.

The men backed away. Black Mask kicked the hatch shut. The two argued. At first, it sounded like gibberish then it became understandable. She looked around for characters who often appeared in her dreams, but only the two masked men seemed to be on the boat with her. She rubbed her eyes. The guy in the Green Mask had pale skin and a bit of a beer gut. Black Mask had muscled tattooed shoulders and arms. In one hand he held a taser.

Uh, oh. This couldn't be real. Martina's mouth dried up and her lungs overfilled. Standing on the mid-deck between the map table and the helm, she counted three exits. The men flanked her, blocking two sliding glass transom doors. The windows revealed water in all directions edged with green strips of land. Blazing sunlight burned through the third exit on the far side of a combination galley and salon area. A breeze threatened to tip Martina off her heels, so she knew she couldn't run. Stupid, pretty shoes.

"I told you she'd get sick," Green Mask said.

"Shut up."

The boat rocked her off-balance, and she fell against the chart table where a hoodie covered a stack of large navigation maps. This hideous nightmare was so detailed it frightened her. The sights and sounds felt real. She grabbed the table's edge, slipped off her shoes, and tugged the hem of her party dress halfway down to her knees. Maybe she could distract them and run. She dropped one shoe. Gravity worked in this reality.

Both men failed the gentlemen test by leaving the shoe on the floor.

"Just do as you're told, and you won't get hurt."

"Says the man with the Taser," Martina said. "Where are we?"

"This is the middle of nowhere," Green Mask said. "Go in there and sit down." He pointed to a dark corridor that dead-ended at the forward stateroom.

The layout and size of the boat meant this was a fishing trawler refitted as a houseboat. Close to forty feet from bow to stern, and twelve-feet wide, it had to be a trawler or tugboat. With the engines and generator off, the silence reminded Martina of something she dreaded while sailing with her family—dead calm. Dead calm on a boat with two masked men in the middle of nowhere. She didn't sign up for this.

She eased down the steps. Swaying through the narrow corridor, she passed a small stateroom on her left and the head on her right, toward the master stateroom at the bow. Dominating the space was a queen berth with narrow pathways around it. For a second, it looked inviting. Who were the idiots in the ski masks? She sobered at the threshold and braced her hands on the doorjambs. "Whoa. Waitamminute. Waitamminute."

Hands shoved her into the cabin face down on the bed. She flipped over, climbed onto the bed, and raised one shoe and one fist into a fighting stance. Nausea and vertigo surged through

her, so she took deep breaths. Between the softness of the mattress and the rocking motion of the boat, she fought for balance.

“Sit down, stupid. Face the camera.”

A small video camera was mounted on a tripod to the left of the doorway. Beside it, a floodlight was clamped to an open cabinet door. A chill raced through her. Bile sloshed up in her throat. Fear swept away hope about fighting her way out of the stateroom with a shoe.

“Think we ought to clean her up?” Green Mask eyed Martina.

“Why not?” Black Mask stepped into the head and ran water. He emerged with a damp towel and handed it to his partner, who gave it to Martina.

“You have vomit on your face.” Green Mack half pointed, half waved toward the left side of her head.

“I’ll puke again if you touch me.” Watching the men, she scrubbed her forehead and the left side of her face and hairline until it wasn’t sticky. She then tossed the towel on the floor by the camera.

Green Mask handed her a paper with large type printed on it. “Read this loud and clear when I tell you to.” He switched on the floodlight and the camera. “Sit down.”

She glanced through the message on the paper. According to the note, she had, at best, until Friday to live. She gasped and looked up at the men in their masks.

“Read it,” Black Mask said.

It wasn’t possible. This was a terrible mistake. It would never work. She sank to her knees on the bed. Her hands dropped to her sides. Her eyes burned. Everything was wrong. Wrong. So horribly wrong. Nightmares like this came from stress coupled with guilt. As her heart raced, she grew alarmed she might die in her sleep. She tried to force herself awake by shouting. “Nooooo.”

Her mind registered two realities in rapid succession. One, Black Mask stepped toward her. Two, blinding pain exploded through her body.

Monday, April 19, 2010

Vincent entered an interview room at the Jacob Javits building, the New York City office of the FBI, where two women in business suits sat across the table from Special Agent Lenny. He shut the door and took a chair beside Lenny.

“These ladies are Mrs. Campbell and Miss Chen. They claim they have urgent information to share about a video Mrs. Campbell received this morning at ten,” Lenny’s tone suggested the ladies were wasting his time. “When I asked them why they waited until three in the afternoon to share this information, they said they would share it only after we met certain conditions. Ladies, this is my partner, Special Agent Vincent Gunnerson.”

Their conditions? Vincent eyed Mrs. Campbell, a fortyish woman with blonde upswept hair and large clunky jewelry. She wore a white silk, low-cut blouse under a bright green jacket. Miss Chen had jet black shoulder-length hair and looked thirty-years-old tops. Dressed in all black, Chen hunched over her smartphone, repeatedly brushing her fingers across the screen.

Mrs. Campbell squared her shoulders and addressed Vincent, “We get crazy fan mail all the time, but this is a first. We want you to verify that this...message is a hoax. So far, we haven’t found it posted on any social media, but if it gets out there, well, we want to be able to say that the FBI says it’s a hoax.” She nudged her companion.

“Nothing on social media so far.” Miss Chen looked up at Vincent and sat up straighter. She sneaked a glance at Vincent’s right hand.

“Have you seen the urgent message?” Vincent asked Lenny.

“Nope.” Lenny tapped his pen on a pad of paper. The corners of his mouth twitched. He had apparently noticed Miss Chen’s sudden shift of attention.

“What is it you do that generates fan mail?” Vincent asked Mrs. Campbell, who seemed to have authority over the younger woman.

“Oh, not us. Our client,” Mrs. Campbell whispered as if the entire office might be eavesdropping. “We also need your word that whatever happens, our client won’t be named in any way in the news.”

Lenny leaned his elbows on the table. “We don’t control the news.”

“What’s your client’s name?” Vincent asked.

“They don’t want to say,” Lenny deadpanned. “They aren’t lawyers evoking client confidentiality. In fact, they’re from the Campbell Agency. They represent,” he said pushing a business card across the tabletop to Vincent, “performing artists.”

Performing artists was vague enough to encompass actors, dancers, musicians, or those self-proclaimed performance artists who occasionally took their clothes off in Central Park and smeared paint on each other while shouting poetry. Vincent sighed. “So, are you going to hand over your entire client list and make us guess which one you’re talking about, or do you have only one client?”

Mrs. Campbell arched an unnaturally-dark eyebrow at Vincent. “Do we have your word you’ll keep this out of the press?”

“No.” Vincent and Lenny answered at once.

Miss Chen glared at Mrs. Campbell until the older woman squirmed. “Our client is Roxie.”

“We need her full name,” Lenny said.

“Oh, come on,” Mrs. Campbell said. “She’s had two platinum albums.” She looked at Miss Chen as if for confirmation that everyone in the world recognized the name.

Miss Chen shook her head. “Wrong demographic.” To Vincent, she said, “Roxanne Wharton is a pop singer. She legally changed her name to Roxie.”

Lenny bristled. “All right so you have a video fan message that you want us to prove is a hoax. Did you take it to the police?”

Mrs. Campbell leaned forward. “I thought the FBI handled kidnappings.”

A chill swept the room as Vincent and Lenny inhaled sharply.

“Give us whatever information you have right now,” Vincent’s voice lowered to an authoritative whisper.

Mrs. Campbell fumbled in her giant gold-studded leather purse, jingling her collection of gold bangle bracelets in the process, and pulled out a palm-sized figure of a young woman in a bikini. She stood the doll on the table in front of Vincent.

He glared at the toy.

Mrs. Campbell pulled the figure apart at the waist, revealing a jump drive. She slapped the pieces back on the table. "It's a video."

Treating it as evidence, neither agent touched it.

"How did you get it?" Lenny poised his pen over his pad of paper.

"It came attached to an email. I made a copy on this Roxie drive," Mrs. Campbell waved at the tiny plastic body. "It's a promotional item from her first platinum album."

Vincent and Lenny exchanged a look, silently debating who would watch the video. While still adjusting to working together, they had fallen into the good cop and bad cop roles, with Lenny as the good cop. Overall, Lenny had excellent people-handling skills. Vincent had already forgiven him for his one notable lapse in judgment when he had turned a particularly deceptive suspected drug dealer into a protected informant. There was plenty of guilt to go around for that debacle. It was time to let go of the whole mess. Lenny was his new partner, like it or not, and as the senior agent, it was Lenny's call.

"Go ahead. I'll extract more info from the ladies," Lenny told Vincent. His weary tone made Vincent wonder how much time he had already spent trying.

Since Vincent didn't have to concern himself about fingerprints, he picked up the top half of the bikini figure, stood, and strode from the room with all the dignity he could muster while holding a half-naked doll.