

NEW L.A. WOMAN

Her favorite time, her favorite place. Nighttime on Sunset—the vibe, the opportunists, the neon signs throwing dreamy color. Everything about it made her feel alive. And at twenty-four, Kitty *wanted* to feel alive. It was why she had moved here.

She put her skateboard beneath her and rolled, breathing warm, tainted air. A smile—as wide and sweet as a slice of orange—broke across her face. She smelled exhaust, peppered steak, vape perfumes, a blend of colognes. A street performer played “What a Fool Believes” and high-fived her between chord changes. Her wheels thumped off the sidewalk.

Kitty Rae had been in Los Angeles four months. It still moved her, and her heart still made a hopeful, tinkling sound when she walked. She’d gone from waiting tables to bartending to selling Jell-O shots at Spearmint Rhino, all within a space of eleven weeks, then Kris “Sly Boy” Streeter had discovered her. Sly Boy was not the talent scout she’d been hoping for, but he lined her pockets in exchange for easy work. It was a start.

It also allowed her to move out of shared lodgings in MacArthur

Park to a smaller—but all hers!—apartment in Silver Lake. It was several steps shy of the L.A. residence she'd imagined for herself, but she *loved* being on the third floor, where the rugged, hypnotically moving tops of the fan palms were at eye level. Even better was the way the setting sun caught her street and splashed the buildings with mauves and oranges. Passion Hour, she called it, even though it lasted only minutes, seven at the most.

Where I live, she'd posted on Instagram, beneath a photograph of her street draped in those rich colors. Her friends back in Louisville had commented: OMFG!! and, Sweeeeeet!! and, Yo still Kentucky bitch. Her mama—whose cheekbones Kitty had inherited, as well as her propensity to dream—had added, So beautiful babygurl but have U met any CELEBRITIES yet??

Well . . .

She'd seen Caitlyn Jenner at a photo shoot at the Getty, and Ezra Faustino arguing with a valet attendant outside a restaurant in North Hollywood (“*I will fuck the fuck out of your shit!*” Mr. Faustino had screamed). All that was lit, but what was *totally* lit was the fact that she lived opposite—*opposite*—Luke Kingsley.

Mama: *Who?*

Luke Kingsley, the troubled star of *Ventura Knights* and *A Bullet Affair*. Kitty told her mama this but Mama didn't know those movies, so Kitty told her what Luke Kingsley was *really* famous for.

Mama: *Oh shit!*

He'd gone from a beautiful house in Sherman Oaks to a two-bedroom mission revival in Silver Lake. Kitty could stand at her window and look down into Luke's living room—could see him watching TV in his boxers and eating Cap'n Crunch right out of the box. And okay, it wasn't as cool as smoking weed with Seth Rogen or bumping beautifuls with Jamie Foxx, but—like working for Kris “Sly Boy” Streeter—it was a start.

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Kitty picked up the goods from the trunk of a Cadillac parked in Norma Triangle (same Caddy every time, different location), then took a bus to East Hollywood and went to work. Twenty minutes in, she made Angelo's drop: an ounce of crystal packed into the false bottom of a Starbucks cup, tossed into a trash can outside Slick's Coin-Op Laundry on Melrose. Angelo's boy arrived moments later. He dug through the trash can and removed the drop. Kitty snapped a photo from across the street—making like she was taking a selfie, although there was no reason for her, or *anyone*, to take a selfie in this neighborhood. She needed the photo, though, as proof the pickup had been made. Kitty had no dealings with the money side of things. She delivered the goods, that was all. She supposed Ruben—Sly Boy's muscle, a man-shaped iron girder—collected, and God help the cranker who didn't pay.

Kitty pocketed her phone, put her board beneath her, and skated away. She'd pushed once—rolled maybe ten feet—when Angelo stepped out from the doorway of Gray's Marketplace, right in front of her, and she would've taken a spill if he hadn't grabbed her upper arm.

She flipped the front of her board up, caught it in her right palm while trying to pull her left arm loose. But Angelo dug his fingers in and grinned.

“You gotta be more careful, girl.”

His real name was Salvador Gallo, but he had earned the nickname Angelo because of his soft black curls and doll-like good looks. He'd appeared in commercials for Gap and Tommy Hilfiger in the early 2000s, and was a semi-regular on the short-lived ABC sitcom *Almost Always*. Then his drug usage went from recreational to obscene, and that was the end of his career. Now his curls were laced with dirt and he had black grooves between his teeth. There was a canker on the side of his nose that never healed.

“Hands off, Angelo.”

“Or what?”

Sly Boy had warned her not to engage with the buyers. “Every degree of separation is a degree that will keep you out of prison,” he’d said. “You don’t want these people getting to know you. They will fuck you over if they get the chance.” Most of Kitty’s drops were clean. No contact. But a buyer would surface on occasion, assuming their presence was welcome.

Angelo, for example: “Why you always so quick to be gone? Don’t you kn-ow we could have a good time, me and you? We could take in the city. Do it all.”

She pulled her arm, but he held on.

“I know a man can get that face on the cover of a magazine. You want that, girl?” The lesion on his nose looked wet and sore in streetlight. “Your face on the cover of a magazine?”

“Just get your dirty fucking—”

Angelo suddenly let go, his hands raised like someone had pointed a .45 at him. It had nothing to do with Kitty struggling to free her arm, or anything she said, and everything to do with the sage-green Mustang—vintage Detroit muscle—cruising toward them. It slowed as it approached. The passenger window buzzed down and Kitty saw the Viking for the first time. He was comfortably into his twenties, ugly-handsome, with a crooked nose and narrow forehead. His long beard was fashioned into two points, a darker shade of blond than the hair that fell to his shoulders.

Kitty heard Angelo say, “Shit,” under his breath, then he turned and ran—bumped into an older lady, who called him a son of a bitch in Spanish and swiped at him with her purse. Angelo was out of range, though, scooting along Melrose with his dirty curls bouncing.

The Mustang voiced an oily, predatory snarl and rumbled on. Kitty watched its taillights for a moment, then skated to her next drop. And that should have been that. End of scene. Fade to black. Except she saw the Mustang again not forty minutes later, at a red light on Beverly. Kitty put it down to coincidence, but logged it.

She made her delivery (an eight-ball stuffed into a Taco Bell wrapper) at a nearby bus stop, photographed the pickup, and checked her backpack. Three drops remaining, then home.

A third sighting of the Mustang—on Sunset this time, ten minutes from her apartment—put her on alert, which developed into a deeper concern when the vehicle started following, then drew alongside her. It matched her speed for fifty yards, give or take, with Kitty looking dead ahead, playing it cool. Maybe the driver would get bored and floor it if she didn't react. Instead, the passenger window rolled down and the Viking's voice rose above the engine's steady rumble.

"You can really shift on that thing."

Kitty ignored him. She zigzagged between pedestrians, lithe as a ribbon. Farther along Sunset, a siren whooped three times, like the call of some exotic bird, and acoustic music strummed from a late-night café.

"I'd like to talk to you," the Viking said. "If you have a moment."

"I don't." Now Kitty looked over. "And stop following me."

Was he an undercover cop? Had he been watching her all night, or for *weeks*, and was now moving in for the bust? Kitty didn't think so. She'd be more likely to get busted at the beginning of her route, with a backpack full of product. Or maybe they wanted to use her in a different way—to take down Sly Boy, perhaps. But even then, they would arrest her first, then turn up the heat.

No, she wasn't getting a cop vibe. The Viking image didn't fit, nor the late sixties ride. And although Kitty couldn't see the driver sitting beside him, she *could* see his hands on the wheel. They were covered in tattoos—too much visible ink for a cop, even one deeply undercover.

"C'mon." The Viking smiled. Maybe he didn't mean to disarm her, but he *did*. He had a charming smile. "Two minutes. That's all I need."

If he wasn't a cop, then his business was on the other side of the thin blue line. A pusher, perhaps, or a pimp. A lawbreaker, for sure, and one of renown, judging by the way Angelo had taken to his heels.

"Not interested," Kitty said. The Micheltorena intersection was just ahead, where she'd usually turn right, skateboard partway up the hill, then hang a left onto her street. She wasn't going to lead these goons to her apartment, though, which meant she had to lose them.

"I don't give up easily," the Viking persisted. "Also, I'm not following, I'm *scouting*."