

# PROTECTOR OF CONVENIENCE

Victoria Paige

## Chapter One

Ariana didn't mean to be a stalker.

She was not this person—a person who couldn't take a hint when several of her calls went unreturned. But the thought of losing her business and letting her employees down had her swallowing her pride. So here she was, stepping out of her vehicle and approaching the woman with the high ponytail.

“Candy?” At the sound of her name, the blonde spun around, face grimacing at the sight of her. Ariana's feet compelled her to run back to her SUV, but she resisted, the faces of her employees flashing before her.

“Ari? What are you doing here?” Candy's smile was brittle, forced. Without waiting for Ariana to answer, she continued walking up the path toward her house.

“I left you messages.”

Candy stopped and rummaged through her bag, presumably for her keys. “And I didn't return your calls for a reason.” Finding them, she resumed walking toward the door. At least the other woman didn't say she was busy because that would be a lie, judging from the tennis outfit she was sporting.

“Have you talked to the board at least?” Ariana asked.

Candy was on the corporate board that managed the building where Ariana leased space for her business. The two women had standing spa dates every two weeks. She thought if they'd spent time together, naked, and caked with either mud or seaweed, they were considered intimate friends, right?

But at this moment, Ariana felt she was seeing the woman for the first time.

Releasing an impatient breath, Candy finally leveled her with a stare. Ariana's heart sunk at the blast of disdain from the woman's eyes. "The board agrees with building management that having you as a tenant is no longer in its best interest." After delivering that statement devoid of any emotional inflection, Candy started for her house again. Upon reaching her door, the blonde fumbled with the locks before pushing it open. She was in the act of closing it when Ariana tried one more time to plead her case, putting her palm on the wooden panel to prevent it from shutting.

"Candy, please—"

The woman peeked at her from between the crack of the door and its frame and Ariana had never felt more unwanted in her life.

"Don't show up here again, Ari. Otherwise, I'll be forced to call the cops on you for harassment."

And with that ultimatum, the third door that day closed on her. At least this one eased shut and was not slammed on her face like the previous two, but Candy Lovell had been her final hope.

Backing away, Ariana pivoted on a spindly heel and strutted back to her Audi SUV, gathering the last shreds of her dignity along the way and praying she wouldn't face-plant in front of the house.

After getting into a vehicle with a price tag incongruent with her current situation, Ariana drove to her business in Beverly Hills—or should she say, her soon-to-be former place of business. The gnawing pit in her gut rankled and she simply could not comprehend how her life had imploded in the past year. What started as a pissing contest between her brother Raul and Hollywood Mogul Peter Woodward was the stuff of movies. Life imitating art couldn't have been more accurate.

When she entered the lobby of the Wescott building, the front desk guard glanced away

upon seeing her, as if a blinding giant scarlet letter was imprinted on her forehead. Paranoia coupled with her frayed nerves made it difficult to discern between normal interaction and being treated like a pariah. So when the elevator opened and it was empty, she breathed a sigh of relief. Ariana needed the respite from judging eyes.

Rejuvenating Vital Infusions occupied a prime location on the fourth floor. Its frosted floor-to-ceiling glass was emblazoned on one side with the name of her company. But instead of the blazing warmth of interior lighting, what greeted her was darkness. A somber reminder that not two weeks ago, she furloughed her employees after building management refused to renew her lease. Citing disruption of peace and danger to the other tenants, they invoked a clause in their lease agreement that allowed the termination of their contract.

She'd been given three weeks to vacate the premises.

A bitter smile etched her features because she had no defense against this. In the days leading up to her brother's death, Ariana was kept in helpless seclusion. Cartel men staked out the building, some of their henchmen even caused a scene in the lobby demanding her whereabouts.

No blood was spilled, but the damage to her reputation was absolute.

She unlocked the door to her clinic and switched on the lights, illuminating the boxes stacked against the wall. The etched grooves in the deep purple and ochre swirls on the carpet hinted that they were once furnished with white leather sofas.

Pain tore through the center of her chest, and her hand flew to her mouth as a sob snagged at her throat. Shaking her head from side to side, trying to rein in the gravity of her loss, her knees buckled.

Ariana sank to the floor beside the reception desk, leaning her back against it for support, and slowly unhooked the straps of her thousand-dollar stilettos, tossing away the shoes.

As the sister of fallen crime lord Raul Ortega, she'd always lived under the shadow of her brother's infamy, but she had been protected.

Before Raul's death, she had a business. People would bend over backwards to do her favors. She was welcome in every social strata, be it the grandeur of a Hollywood star's home or the humble dwellings of an immigrant day worker.

After Raul, she had nothing.

She was shunned by everyone. By the wealthy because she'd become more of a liability than an asset, and as for the rest of them? Who knows?

Fear maybe.

Ariana couldn't blame the people around her. Once a person was marked by a cartel, the stigma was perpetual. Even when Migs—

No. She would not think of him.

He left her.

She was just a job to him.

The pain in her chest rooted deeper, intensified. What this experience taught her was that friends and money were temporary. Ariana had to rely on herself to survive. Her shoulders pulled back and her chin inched up.

She was an Ortega.

She had the blood of a Sinaloan.

They were survivors.

Getting to her feet, she padded to her office. Her desk was the only remaining furniture in this space. Most of the drawers had been emptied. Her business was computerized and left little paper trail by using a cloud service. Pulling open the bottom drawer, a brief smile touched the corners of her lips as she lifted the comfortable flats she kept there.

Putting them on, she walked back to the reception area and took one last look at the surroundings. The movers would come tomorrow and transfer the rest to storage as Ariana figured out how to rebuild her life.

For now, she was leaving the old one behind.

She walked out the door and left the stilettos where they lay.

\*\*\*\*\*

A lone figure sat on her front steps.

Ariana lived in an affluent neighborhood in the Brentwood zip code, but her Mediterranean-style house didn't have a gate or a fence. She didn't like them. Having spent much of her childhood wondering what was on the other side of the intimidating walls of

mansions, she balked at the idea. Now that the security of Raul's protection was ripped away, she wondered if it was time to get over that hang up.

It was after eight at night, and her foyer lights illuminated her unexpected guest. She recognized Connie—the head nurse at her clinic who held the fort when the CIA had taken Ariana into hiding. The nurse also held things together when Ariana fell ill soon after Raul died. When she recovered and was strong enough to take back the reins of RVI, Ariana was shocked at how bad business had gotten. They'd steadily lost customers since the first fentanyl attack—a casualty of the vendetta between her brother and Woodward. But still, she and Connie tried to regroup and get RVI back in the black until Wescott gave them notice that they were terminating the lease. That destroyed all hope that her clinic could bounce back. Ariana gave her employees a generous payout plus health insurance until the end of this year while she debated restructuring. She wondered if Connie needed more.

Pulling up beside the walkway, she got out of the Audi and rounded the vehicle to meet the nurse. Her smile faded when Connie's angry expression blasted through her.

"Connie?" Ariana approached the other woman warily. "Is everything all right?"

She wasn't prepared when Connie rushed her.

A stinging slap sent her head jerking to the right and a woman's keening wail rang in her ears.

Shock and confusion gripped Ariana, and she barely understood the words of Connie's rapid-fire speech.

"The cartel took Leah! It's your fault! You put us all in danger," the other woman cried. "Why? Why did I ever stay with you when everything was going to hell?"

Ariana raised her arms to ward off another blow, but it never came. She lowered them and saw the horror on Connie's countenance as if she'd realized that she'd attacked her boss.

Connie buried her face in her hands and started to sob. Leah was her fifteen-year-old daughter. A child on the cusp of womanhood. A block of ice settled in Ariana's gut as the implication of what could happen to her at the hands of the cartel.

"Let's go inside," Ariana said gently. "Tell me everything."

"She was walking home from the mall this afternoon when they grabbed her," Connie

said when she calmed down. It was unsettling for Ariana to see her head nurse distraught this way. Connie Roque had been with her since the beginning of Rejuvenating Vitamin Infusions five years ago. Ariana had seen Leah grow from a chatterbox child with glasses and pigtails into a beautiful, precocious teen. There were many times she'd seen her friend clash with her headstrong child. As a single parent, Connie had a lot on her plate, but she somehow managed to run RVI with efficiency as well as being on top of her own personal life.

“How sure are you it's the cartel?”

“I'm sure!” Torment glazed Connie's eyes. “Leah's friend was with her and described the tattoo. A bird in flames holding a sword.”

Ariana stilled. She'd seen those tattoos on one of the groups who supported Raul. *Águila y Fuego*—Eagle and Fire. “That's a gang tattoo, Connie, not cartel.”

“You weren't there!” Connie turned from her and stared out the window, fidgeting with her fingers in a sure sign of anxiety.

Ariana didn't point out that she wasn't making sense, but waited for her to say more. She did.

“When you ran away ...” There was an accusing tone in Connie's voice.

“I was taken into hiding by force.”

Her friend's mouth twitched in disdain. “Must be nice.”

Ariana sighed. “We talked about it, remember? I gave you a chance to close RVI while I was gone.”

“I was trying to keep your business running for you!”

“And I appreciated that. Even when I fell sick, you continued to do so, and you even took care of me. I owe you a lot, Connie.”

Her friend seemed mollified to a certain degree. “Anyway, I recognized that tattoo from the guys who were hanging around the clinic when you weren't around. One of them probably saw Leah when she came by after school. That's how they marked her.”

“You reported this to the LAPD?”

“Of course! But Leah's friend didn't want to talk. She's scared and she told a different story. Said Leah went willingly into the van. So they're classifying this case as a runaway.”

Ariana had heard that the business of human trafficking had escalated in the Valley ever

since Raul died. It was one business her brother did not condone and was one reason he never saw eye-to-eye with the cartel from Tamaulipas—a cartel that until last year wasn't a major player. But it seemed Raul's death triggered its rise to power. Since then, there were rumors that it had acquired the loyalty of the gangs in the Valley.

“Have they made any demands?”

Connie emitted a derisive laugh, but her eyes were close to tears again. “You know this is not kidnap for ransom. It's not something we can pay off.”

Both women stared at each other. The fear in their eyes was palpable and having worked with the immigrant population, they were no strangers to the toll of human trafficking.

“What do you want me to do?” Ariana raised her arms up and down helplessly. “If you know someone, I have the financial resources—”

Connie was already shaking her head. “Money won't help. It's who you know. Please, Ari, is there someone who is still loyal to Raul you can ask? The window of opportunity might close very soon and we'll lose track of Leah forever.”

Her plea strangled her heart since Ariana didn't have many influential friends left except one. Someone who was in a position to help her with this. The question was if she was willing to pay the price for Leah's freedom.



## Chapter Two

A desk job.

This was essentially what it amounted to as Migs glowered at the spreadsheets on the screen. He was not a damned analyst. Going through the financial statements of a company rumored to be involved in arms dealing in the Pacific Northwest was not the job description he signed up for when he joined the agency.

Granted they did have a reason for sticking him in a corner office in Bellingham, Washington. The agency was not too happy with the very public coverage of the Ortega incident, and if Migs had a doubt how the CIA tortured their operatives who'd gone rogue, that doubt was gone now. He should be grateful they didn't kick him out of the agency or send him to Alaska.

“Waaaaalker.” The annoying voice of the resident analyst chimed behind him.

Maybe Alaska was better.

Getting stuck in a cramped office with Bob Taylor could be the worst punishment inflicted on anyone in his opinion. The man in question appeared by his desk and perched at its corner, a bag of chips in one hand, with the other shoving those crunchy bits into his mouth.

The crunchiness was annoyingly loud because Bob was chewing with his mouth open.

Migs ground his molars as a stray piece fell from the man's mouth and landed on his

table. How he knew this without looking at Bob, Migs wasn't sure. What he did know was he'd find crumbs on his desk when the man left. It also seemed the analyst was looking to stay and chat.

Fuck.

“So about happy hour—”

“Working—” Migs clipped.

“Aw, come on, man,” Bob whined. “You need a break.”

“I'm good.”

“Look. The spreadsheets will still be there tomorrow, and there's no rush on this. All the focus on this coast is finding that doctor.” Bob caught himself. At least the analyst wasn't too dense to know that was a sore subject with Migs.

Charles Bennett was the virologist who sprung Ortega from the CDC's station in LA and disappeared. With the CIA intent on covering their asses in DC, they muzzled the people who could have gone after Bennett—namely Migs and Garrison. The ones currently in charge didn't know shit on how to sort out the conflicting intel. And here they were, eight months later no closer to finding Bennett.

Migs was banished to Bellingham and put on desk duty.

God knew where the fuck Garrison was.

He leaned against the back of his chair, hoping the expression on his face was enough to silence Bob. He didn't have a lot of patience nowadays and his temper had gotten him into trouble before. The last thing he needed was another mark on his record for decking an analyst who wouldn't shut up.

“Guess you're really busy,” Bob said in disappointment as he straightened from the table.

Hallelujah.

Migs dipped his chin.

“I'll leave you alone then.”

“Appreciate it.”

“You don't talk too much, do—” Bob raised his arms in surrender as Migs narrowed his eyes. “I'm going. I'm going. Just saying. You're gonna miss all the fun and cheap beer...” The analyst's voice faded as he walked away.

When the door to the office closed, a strong urge to bang his head on the table overcame him. Migs counted to ten instead, although when it came to Bob, twenty was a more realistic number. His eyes landed on the crumbs on the table, and, letting out a resigned breath, grabbed the folder beside him and swept the particles into the trash bin beside his desk.

His eyes returned to the screen, but he wasn't seeing the numbers. The reminder of Charles Bennett only exposed the raw nerve that had the power to pull his thoughts to the fiery Ariana. She was never far from his mind. He stalked her online, but that only made him feel like shit because he'd witnessed the implosion of her business on social media and there was fuck all he could do about it.

The agency had him on a very tight leash.

He hadn't wanted to leave her, but the alternative was getting charged with insubordination, and he wouldn't put it past the agency to throw him into the brig with a bogus charge like treason. And if he tried to contact her in any way? They'd pull her surveillance which is something Migs wouldn't put past them to keep him in line. If that didn't suck enough, they revoked his level-three security access and left him to request information from Bob when his basic one wasn't sufficient. But despite the gravity of what Migs had done, he knew the CIA valued his skills and connections in Mexico. He just had to be patient, but he was the first to admit that it was wearing thin.

It was almost midnight when he finished his report. He thought about stopping at a bar on the way back to his apartment, but he was brain dead. Doing a job he hated and being forced to do it was a sure fire way to give a person a migraine. As he turned off the office lights, his phone rang with an unknown number.

Staring at it for a beat, he swiped the screen. "Walker."

"Done for the night?"

"Garrison?"

"Miss me?"

Migs sidled up to the window, peeked between the blinds and down the street. That might be a silhouette of a man under a tree away from the street light, but it was hard to tell for sure. The spook was too smart to expose his presence like that.

"I thought they'd sent you to Antarctica."

There was a brief chuckle. "Close enough."

"Does that mean I'm getting out of this town?"

"Meet me at Oxford."

Fifteen minutes later, Migs was striding toward the bench at Oxford Park which was technically closed to the public by nine and made it the best place to meet John Garrison.

Garrison had been his handler in the Ortega op and instead of letting the FBI take over the case when teen stars Theo Cole and Emma Haller got kidnapped, everyone agreed to go rogue to save them.

John was already waiting for him at their rendezvous point, sitting back, an ankle crossed over a knee with both arms over the back of the bench. When Migs sat beside him, Garrison straightened his posture and leaned forward.

"Tell me good news, John."

"Antonio Andrade is on his way to LA."

Migs stiffened. He certainly wasn't expecting that news. "Brave move. Are you going to arrest him?"

"He hasn't done anything wrong."

"You're certain beyond reasonable doubt?"

"According to my sources, he's as hell bent as we are in finding the culprit who'd used one of his labs to manufacture the Z-91."

The Z-91 virus was a weaponized version of Ebola.

There could be only one reason why Andrade was heading to LA. "He's going after Ariana." It took all his self-control to remain seated. There was no way he was staying in Washington now. "Get me out of here."

"Ariana called him."

"What?" Migs couldn't believe his ears. "She hates him."

"Hate is a strong word," Garrison said carefully. "Maybe she wanted to defy her brother's wishes in marrying her off to Andrade."

He didn't like where Garrison was going with this. "What are you implying?"

"Could be she's seeing Andrade in a different light."

“He wants her as a trophy wife,” Migs sneered. “Ariana is better than that.”

“Would that be so bad given her dicey situation?”

Migs jumped to his feet and glared at the other man. “What the fuck? I thought Andrade forbade the cartel to touch Ariana after they killed Ortega.”

“You’re talking about the PNO. I’m talking about Carillo.”

He froze at the name of a supposedly dormant organization that left John’s lips. “So the rumors are true? They’re back?”

John nodded. “They’ve gained the loyalty of major gangs in LA.”

Migs scrubbed his face. This was bad news. Eight months not being able to do shit in this hellhole and the cartel he’d paid a high price to put away was back. “They’re bad fucking news.”

“Don’t need to tell me that. Human trafficking has gone up in the Valley.”

“Why the fuck am I only finding out about this now?” It sucked to be stuck in *Nowhere*, Washington, stripped of level-three access.

“Your cousin should know.”

“You know more than anyone that we don’t talk like we used to.” Emotion lodged in his throat.

“It wasn’t your fault, Walker. Your uncle shouldn’t have trusted the Carillos.”

Migs looked away. “We should never have used him.”

“He was the best asset we had.”

He glanced back at Garrison. “Is that what this is all about? My connections to the Alcantara family?” He laughed derisively. “You think they don’t suspect?”

Garrison regarded him carefully. Under the glow of the streetlamp it was hard to tell what the spook was thinking. “It’s been four years, Walker. It wasn’t your place to tell them what happened.” He leaned back against the bench again and resumed his initial posture when Migs arrived. “But we’re talking about Ariana and Andrade.”

Hearing Ariana’s name linked with that motherfucker’s grated on his nerves. “There’s no Ariana and Andrade.”

Even in the dim light the arching of Garrison’s brow was evident. “There might be. Unless we can find her an alternative solution.”

“Solution to what?”

“Let’s just say our girl is in a bind.”

“Is she in danger?” He was fast losing his cool with the spook’s obvious hedging.

“That depends.”

“Goddammit, Garrison. Get to the point.”

“She wants Andrade to arrange a meeting with one of Carillo’s lieutenants—”

“For God’s sake, why?”

“Negotiate the release of a friend’s daughter, but I believe it’s a setup. The man who took over for Carillo had a strong beef with Ortega. He wasn’t satisfied with his death and sees an opportunity for revenge.”

“I still don’t understand.” Migs started pacing the short width of the bench when all he wanted to do was drive straight to LA. “Besides, would Andrade be willing to talk to Carillo? Would the PNO even accept this?”

Garrison shrugged. “You know the history of the Mexican cartels. Allies today, mortal enemies tomorrow.”

Didn’t he know it. He started walking away.

“Where the hell are you going?” Garrison demanded.

Migs turned around but was walking backwards. “Los Angeles. Not wasting time hashing this out. I know you’ll send me what I need to know.”

He spun on his heel and headed toward the parking lot, knowing more intel was forthcoming from Garrison. He wasn’t a fan of wasting time, and he couldn’t wait a second longer to get back to Ariana.

\* \* \*