

Lucy Lowell tucked into the shadows behind the white cinder block wall of *Xochitl's Cantina* and listened. Coarse Spanglish curses pierced the night, accompanied by loud cheers and snatches of Tijuana narco-pop. Vicious barking and short, pained shrieks lacerated the seedy revelry.

Through holes in the camouflage canvas stretched over the parking lot's chain-link fence, Lucy counted thirty East Los Locos gangbangers crowding around a shallow dogfight pit. Strewn around, discarded like trash, lay lumps of fur and flesh Lucy didn't have the stomach to focus on. Through the wall of men, Lucy caught a glimpse of a blue nose pit bull turning away from its opponent, a muscular pit mastiff mix.

"Handle your dog, güey!" a paunchy man yelled from just outside the ring.

Accompanied by loud taunts, men from each side of the pit dragged their dogs back to the scratch lines. The mastiff's handler fussed at the dog's mouth, unfanging the dog's lip from its teeth. Clearly dead tired and hurt, the blue nose pit bull started toward the line of cages against the opposite fence.

"Whoa, Puta." A young man with a baseball cap turned backwards yanked the dog's collar hard, causing the pit to drop to the ground as if taking cover.

From her hiding place, Lucy could see deep scratches on the pit bull's face, bite wounds bleeding on the shoulder and old burn marks seared into the fur.

Lucy's stomach cramped.

The dollar tacos she and her partner Gabe had devoured on their way to Echo Park threatened a hasty exit. *Cabra Blanca*, their favorite late night food truck, had been parked close to the raid at Montana and Alvarado. Eddie, the owner, always included extra mango guacamole with Lucy's order.

Guacamole! Shouldna eaten. The dogfighting makes me sick enough. Why'd I chance it with the cabeza quesadilla on top of those goat tacos?

Lucy breathed in slowly and directed her gaze from the hurt dog to the few stars blinking in the murky L.A. sky. The lights of an airplane outshone the sliver of the waning crescent moon. She could make out the distant roar of jet engines.

"Bitch won't fight no more, jefe." The young man with the cap delivered a kick to the blue nose pit's side. An ugly curse cut through the tumult as a man in a formfitting white T-shirt and dark designer jeans parted the crowd.

Memo Morales, cock of the walk. Nice of you to join us.

Teeth clenched, Lucy drew her sidearm and looked back down the alley. Officer Gabe Torres of the LAPD Animal Cruelty Task Force quietly crouched down next to Lucy, indicating with a nod that he too had spotted "El Gallo."

Her partner for five years, Gabe was as fierce an animal rights protector as Lucy had ever met. Both she and Gabe had risked both badge and incarceration many times, as they rescued dogs from backyard dogfighting with or without departmental approval.

Tonight's raid was another point of contention with their ACTF lieutenant. When the confidential informant had approached Lucy and Gabe about dogfighting behind her cantina, it had been just the break they'd been looking for. These East Los Locos had been brokering dogfights for years, but their slippery leader Memo Morales, a.k.a. "El Gallo," always managed to ensconce the events with aggravating efficiency.

Distressingly the CI, Xochitl Magaña, had given Lucy and Gabe much more than they'd hoped for. El Gallo and his Los Locos were running guns. The dogfights, while generating tens of thousands of dollars on their own, were a mere front. Lucy and Gabe's supervisor Lieutenant Heckman had turned their information over to her superior, Captain

Burch. Burch had taken the lead on the raid, called in SWAT and only allowed the ACTF along as a courtesy after Lucy had begged to be involved. Lucy and Gabe had been virtually cut out of the planning despite their relentless pursuit of the East Los Locos dogfighting ring.

"Get rid of it, Tuti!" El Gallo spat, prompting Lucy to inch forward. She could see El Gallo throw a fistful of cash at another man and stalk into the cantina through the backdoor.

The gangbangers laughed and joked as more money changed hands. Pushing the baseball-capped banger away, the man named Tuti threw a chain around the bloodied pit bull's neck and dragged her clear of the wall of men. The exhausted dog cowered from Tuti as he tightened the chain around her neck. Small whimpers reached Lucy's ears.

"Just shoot it." A thin teenage boy in baggy jeans and an oversized white T-shirt approached Tuti with what looked like a Hi-Power Browning 9mm.

Nice gun.

A detached part of Lucy's brain noted the semi-automatic.

"¡Cállate, Flaco! Let's have some fun." Tuti yanked the chain, smashing the pit's chin into the asphalt. The sharp yowl caught the attention of the other attending Locos who turned to watch Tuti's show.

Gabe's hand settled on Lucy's arm and held tight. She would have bruises in the morning.

"Wait," he hissed.

Lucy tilted her head to look directly into her partner's dark brown eyes. In a split second a struggle resolved between them. Burch's words, "You two hotheads are on thin ice," echoed in her memory. She knew Gabe remembered it too.

"X the bitch, Tuti!" Drunken hysteria pitched the Locos' voices higher. "¡Fuego! ¡Fuego! ¡Fuego!"

Her eyes still locked on Gabe, Lucy knew what was happening in the parking lot. Having investigated the sad aftermath of the East Los Locos games, she knew what inevitably came next. Slowly she nodded her head, and Gabe released his grip. It wasn't the plan. It wasn't even smart.

Lucy rose to her full height. Her Beretta clutched firmly, Lucy shot a quick smile to Gabe. Easily on the taller side of six feet, muscled like a professional bodybuilder, Gabe Torres looked scary as hell.

Glad you're on my side, good buddy.

Lucy felt calm wash down from her head to her toes. This was what she was made for.

*

Xochitl Magaña paced nervously behind the bar of her cantina, anxiously waiting for the cops to arrive.

¡Santa Maria, reza por mí!

Turning in her gangbanger boyfriend Memo was dangerous at best.

I'm gonna be in deep shit if this doesn't go down right...And Miguel, Memo'll...

"No," Xochitl hissed, squashing the sprouting thought before it could ripen. "This'll work."

She snatched a towel from its hook and began wiping down the individual liquor bottles that lined the shelves behind the bar.

El Gallo's done.

Memo Morales preferred the moniker "El Gallo" and fancied himself Tony Montana.

¡Híjole! What's with vatos and Scarface?

And like an over-glorified, self-obsessed crime lord, El Gallo had exploited his relationship with Xochi, using her bar as his headquarters — his command center for the gang's illegal operation.

And I let him.

But El Gallo gave her protection — something Xochitl desperately needed after her papa had died. And she had to admit, just as Memo liked having the only fair-skinned, light-eyed, natural blond ruca in the neighborhood, she'd initially liked the attention he'd given her.

It had been hard growing up a "güera" in the barrio — a place, despite being Mexicana, Xochitl had never felt she truly belonged.

School had been her refuge, and she'd even won an academic scholarship to UCLA.

I was so close to getting out.

Then everything changed. Her father had a stroke. His health rapidly deteriorated. She dropped all her classes. Moved back home. Took over the bar. Took over care of Miguel.

Back in the hood, back in the life — with Memo.

But Memo went too far. Gun running. There was no way Xochitl could live with herself knowing she had let this thug take over the business her papa had worked so hard to build.

God, what would Papa think of me now? I just wanted to keep the bar going and Miguel safe.

Xochitl hated all of it: the dogfights, the guns, the East Los Locos — Memo.

She shook off the flutter of nerves vibrating up and down her spine and noticed she'd been wiping off the same fifth of tequila. As she carefully placed the *Cuervo Gold* in its proper slot between the *Don Julio* and

Patrón bottles, she caught the reflection of her cantina in the mirrored glass that backed the liquor racks lining the wall.

Wood and leather tables filled the space. A '50s style jukebox, her papa's pride and joy, played only vinyl from the '60s and '70s. "Mija, there's no other music." He would tell her whenever she'd begged him to update the playlist. Various paintings of matadors and bullfights attempted to lend a Spanish flavor to the rugged bar.

Xochitl's Cantina had been Xochi's home since she was six when her father, Carlos, had left the Marine Corps, following her mother's death. And in its heyday, her papa's bar had been the favorite local hangout.

The barrio Cheers.

By the time she was eleven, Xochitl had a stepmother she couldn't stand and a new baby brother she adored.

¡Híjole! In one shot, Anita went from barfly to mother. What was Papa thinking?

But Xochitl remembered how sad and lonely her papa had been after her mom had died. He was honorable and would never have considered not marrying the mother of his child. Carlos Magaña was the finest man Xochi had ever known.

Biting back tears, Xochitl clenched her eyes. Her papa's warm and inviting spirit echoed within every element of the cantina.

I miss you Papa.

For what seemed like the millionth time, Xochi looked up to the neon *DOS EQUIS* clock hanging over the bar.

2:37 A.M.? They're late. The fights'll be over and Memo'll leave soon. He's gonna wonder why I'm still here and not waiting for him upstairs.

"Where the hell are they?" she mumbled.

"Where the hell's who?" Memo Morales asked.

Startled, Xochitl whipped around, knocking over several liquor bottles. She barely registered the clamoring rattle of glass hitting glass as Memo, who had come in from the back without her noticing, stood behind her.

Shit!

Despite the frozen crush of heart-stomping anxiety, Xochi couldn't help admire Memo's movie star looks and how his white T-shirt and jeans emphasized his strong, lean build. His big, hazel eyes always took her breath away. Tonight was no different.

Still the best-looking guy in the neighborhood.

"Who's late?" Memo asked again, grabbing a beer from the cooler under the bar. "Huh, what?...Uh...no one. I mean, Miguel. He's late." Memo wrapped his arms around Xochi and tugged at her rose embroidered peasant blouse. "¡Ay, mamá! Let the boy be. He's almost eighteen. A man." He began kissing her neck. "Why don't you go upstairs, put on that sexy slip thing I got you? I'm all wound up. You can help me relax."

Wrinkling her nose at the smell of stale beer and dog, Xochi shrugged Memo off her. "What do you know about it? He's not one of your boys."

Xochitl knew she shouldn't be flippant with Memo. He had a short temper and could be aggressive with her when he didn't get his way. But she couldn't help herself when it came to her little brother Miguel. She hated it when Memo thought he had any say in how Miguel was raised.

She wanted to yell in Memo's face, "Stay away cabrón! He's mine!" Instead she whispered, "I'm tired."

Xochitl walked around to the front of the counter, trying to put distance between herself and Memo. She could see in his eyes he was losing his patience.

Where's la chota already?

Undeterred, Memo closed the gap between them and grabbed her arm, yanking her to him. "I said go upstairs and get in that pinche slip, bitch."

Xochitl pulled her arm back and without thinking threw a right hook to his jaw. Instantly, she felt pain shoot from her fist straight up her arm. "¡Ay carajo!"

Shaking out the sting from her hand, Xochi looked up and saw Memo stunned, holding the left side of his face.

Oh, fuck! What did I do?

Instinctively, she began backing up toward the bar's front door to make her escape.

As she turned from Memo, Xochi heard a menacing laugh and the distinctive clicking sound of a gun being cocked.

"Not bad for a little güera bitch. Daddy teach you that?"

Xochitl grabbed for the door.

"Don't you fucking move, puta."

Naked fear blasted through Xochitl's body, leaving her feet bolted to the floor.

She had nowhere to go. If she moved, Memo would shoot her.

He's gonna shoot you anyway.

Taking a chance, she slowly turned back to face Memo. He stood at close range, his gun pointed at her chest.

Oh, God.

Xochi raised her hands in the air.

"Please, Memo," she tried to placate him. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—"

"¡Cállate!" Memo growled, pacing back and forth in front of her like a wild beast about to pounce on his prey.

An odd bubble of calm enveloped Xochi, and — as if locked in stasis,

she stood immobile, waiting, contemplating her next move.

"You think you can do this to me and not pay, bitch? I'm El Gallo!"

Xochitl stole a glance at the bar.

Behind the counter. Papa's shotgun. If I'm quick enough...

"I run this—" Memo raged on only to suddenly cut himself off.

Xochitl brought her attention back to El Gallo. He stared past her at the frosted glass window. She slowly craned her neck to follow his line of sight. A shadow moved swiftly by the front of the bar.

¡Híjole! About damn time!

She turned back to Memo. His eyes again fixed on her. Xochitl could see by the amazed and — *hurt?* — look on his face that he'd puzzled out she had betrayed him. Why Memo hadn't made a move on her yet she didn't understand. She wasn't about to ask. Keeping him in her sights, she began inching her way to the bar.

Xochitl had almost reached the end of the counter when Manny, a fourteen-year-old boy, one of Memo's lookouts, sprinted into the cantina from the kitchen. "¡Jefe! ¡La chota! ¡Afuera!"

Memo regained his senses. "¿Dónde?"

"Everywhere. I came from the dumpsters out back," the boy answered.

¡Carajo! The cops didn't find the kitchen entrance!

The side alley door was hidden by the dumpster enclosure. Xochitl's produce vendors constantly complained about the difficult access.

If I get out of this alive, I'm gonna move those pinche dumpsters.

"Did anyone see you?" El Gallo asked the boy as he moved toward the kitchen and peeked through the swinging door.

"No, Jefe," the boy replied, pulling out a 9mm handgun stuffed in his pants like a gangster out of a movie he'd probably watched a million times.

"The cops will find the kitchen door soon." Memo stepped back into the bar.

Xochitl eyed El Gallo, as he searched the room for another way out, revulsion churning her guts.

How did I ever get mixed up with this monster? What am I gonna do if he gets away?

Memo glanced down the hall toward the restrooms. His mouth turned up into a sly grin, and Xochi knew he had figured out his escape.

¡Hijo de puta! Where's pinche Xena warrior cop?

Unsure, Manny took a tentative step closer to El Gallo.

Memo put up his hand, halting the boy. "Stay here, homes. Pinche cops can't touch you." The gang leader beat his chest with his fist and shouted in salute, "¡Órale! East Los!"

"East Los!" The dutiful boy soldier mimicked.

Some day this kid's gonna get himself killed by these pendejos. That will not be my Miguel.

El Gallo turned back to Xochitl, "I'll deal with you later." Then he ran down the hall toward the women's restroom.

Xochi stood next to the bar, staring after Memo. There was nothing she could do now except hope the cops would nab him crawling out the bathroom window. She looked over to Manny, who appeared lost now that his leader had ditched him.

Poor kid. Doesn't even know Memo could give a shit what happens to him.

Shouting and gunfire blasted from the back lot.

Officer Lowell.

Xochi darted behind the bar, grabbed the Smith & Wesson 12 gauge, checked it was loaded and readied herself. Looking up, she watched Manny cock his gun.

"Wait," she hissed.

Manny smiled at her and ran for the back exit.

"Shit!" Xochitl, shotgun in hand, took off after the boy.

*

"LAPD!" Gabe shouted as he and Lucy burst from the shadows.

Tuti, tilting a red plastic gas can, hunched over the injured pit bull.

"Down on the ground!" Gabe followed up. Tuti froze.

An incredulous roar rose from the surprised Locos as Lucy rammed her full force into Tuti, taking him down and knocking the gas can from his hands. She jumped to her feet and buried her boot in Tuti's midsection. He gasped and curled in on himself.

The crowd of Locos reacted with indecent speed, scrambling down the alley, climbing fences, grabbing dogs and cash as they fled.

A few took in the fact that all that was threatening them were two cops — alone, and one of them was a woman. Like pack predators they closed in, toothy smiles flashing in the glow of the streetlights.

The back door of the bar flew open. A skinny teenage boy wildly waving a handgun ran toward Gabe in a straight line.

"Manny! No!" A screech Lucy barely recognized as belonging to Xochitl Magaña rang out from inside the hallway.

Gabe clotheslined Manny effortlessly and sent his gun flying through the air. Hitting the ground it went off, prompting other frenzied Los Locos to fire blindly in return. The sound of feet running from both sides of the alley, the whirring sound of helicopter blades overhead, the sudden warning shouts of police and ACTF overlapped with the howling and barking of dogs and hollers from Los Locos escaping over the fence.

Bodies in flight and pursuit, knocked over cages, men crashing or being thrown into the chain-link — the chaos all around made Lucy feel a weird calm.

She noticed Flaco holding up his phone, filming the entire scene, turning his narco-pop to full blast while tears flowed freely down his scrunched up face.

Freak.

Near her, Gabe scooped up the injured pit bull and bolted towards the safety of the door propped open by Xochitl Magaña.

"You idiots weren't supposed to grab the dog!" Xochitl sounded furious.

Men came at him from all sides, shouting and flailing. Gabe barreled through them as if they were nothing.

Screeching, Flaco raised his Browning to take aim at Gabe's back. Lucy clocked the boy in the face with her Beretta. He went straight to the ground.

"You fucking weasel!" she spat and bent down to scoop up his gun.

Someone grabbed her from behind, but she twisted out of the way, losing her grip on Flaco's 9mm. There was nowhere to go now but to follow Gabe and the pit bull through the open back entrance to *Xochitl's Cantina*. Lucy sprinted ahead, tripped over the stoop and gracelessly crashed onto the cantina floor, cutting her hands and bruising her pride.

Crap!

A shot rang out, and for a moment everything seemed to slow down. Lucy saw Gabe, who'd been in front of her and was already in the room, go to his knees on the blue linoleum. He bent forward unnaturally, releasing the pit bull who scrambled under a wooden table.

Lucy lurched forward on the floor to half push and half drag Gabe out of range of the shots that were continuing through the backdoor. From

behind the bar, Lucy heard Xochitl scream, "Stop shooting, you assholes!"

The gunfire stopped.

"Lucy." The deep rumble of Gabe's voice took her complete focus. Something was very wrong. Gabe's face had turned pasty white and glistened with sweat. Lucy locked onto Gabe's eyes — normally deep chocolate brown, they now glowed a mesmerizing amber.

Before she could react, five Locos burst into the room, shouting and waving their guns. Gabe sprang up, knocking Lucy on her back, and crashed into the Locos with breathtaking force and speed.

Gabe's already large frame now appeared monstrous, the muscles of his back and arms bulging and pulsing, his bones lengthening and cracking. Clean-shaven a moment ago, his face looked dirty with dark stubble. His hair, always cut high and tight — a remnant of his time in the service, now brushed his shoulders and rolled down his back like a messy lion's mane.

Gabe roared like an animal in agony and ripped through one of the men's throats with the startling long, curved claws of his bare hand.

He grabbed a gangbanger with the other hand, dangling the man off the floor and shaking him by the face like a rag doll.

Lucy started to black out as what felt like a massive shockwave rocked through her body. She fought to keep her eyes open. The small coherent part of her brain observed that Gabe's Kevlar vest had a small rip in the back. Even if the vest had stopped a bullet from going through, it couldn't have saved his ribs from being broken. Yet Gabe moved unencumbered, with the power of ten men.

She fixated on the shaggy black layer of fur that covered her partner's head and arms. Just then he turned in profile; large pointed, fur-covered ears swiveled back like those of an aggressive dog. Razor-sharp teeth flashed in a tapered lupine jaw, and he bit down on the last gangbanger.

My partner's a werewolf?

Lucy convulsed as hysteria shot through her like an electric shock.

"SWAT! Drop your weapons! Nobody move!" At that moment, the SWAT team burst through the front door of the cantina.

Gabe spun on the armed men, ready to attack.

"No, Gabe! Stop!" Lucy screamed the command, instinct trumping fear. Gabe hesitated and looked at her with curiosity.

Holy shit! He's listening to me.

"SWAT! Get on the floor!" an officer roared as the team closed in.

"LAPD. Don't shoot," Lucy yelled out and lurched ahead to put her body between Gabe and the SWAT officers. "Don't shoot. Don't shoot. Don't shoot." Lucy's voice gave out. Tears streamed down her face as she tried to squeeze sound from her throat, but her vocal chords wouldn't obey anymore and violent coughs shook her.

She felt Gabe's hot breath on her neck and turned to face him, slowly and deliberately.

"Down, Gabe." She pointed to the floor. "Down."

For a split second, everyone in the room stood still and watched Gabe. The massive man swayed briefly and then dropped to the floor like a puppet that had had its strings cut.

"Officer down. Code 33. Echo Park. North Alvarado and Clinton. Officer down. Start me additional units and medical. Code 3. Officer shot. Approach from northwest."

"On their way."

Lucy heard the shouting but didn't comprehend the words. She crouched down beside her partner, holding him tight as convulsions wracked his

body. She saw blood drip to the floor. Gabe had been hit despite the Kevlar.

"Don't die. Don't die. You can't die." Lucy's words ran together in an incessant chant. She was lost in his pain, unable to focus, oblivious to the pandemonium all around her.

*

Xochitl barely registered the sting of the zip ties digging into her wrists as she lifted her head from the floor to stare at Officer Lowell's partner. Lowell was cradling him in her arms, rocking him back and forth like a child.

¡Madre de Dios!

Xochi would have crossed herself if she could have.

She pried her gaze from Lowell and Torres and surveyed the room. With the exception of the officer who had radioed in assistance, SWAT circled Lowell and Torres. Some of the officers still had their guns drawn, others had them hanging at their sides, but all stood with their mouths gaping open in stunned silence.

What the hell just happened? And how did Lowell stop it...him?

Xochitl brought her attention back to Lowell. She looked exposed, tears running down her face as she whispered to her partner. This Lucy Lowell was not the same reserved, focused, unrelenting pain-in-the-ass Officer Lowell who had walked into Xochi's bar several months ago, pressing her for information on Los Locos. No, this woman was something different. She was nurturing, vulnerable — unprotected.

And yet, she still managed to control the situation. That takes cajones.

Xochitl had a new respect for the woman.

She heard a loud commotion outside and craned her neck to look at the frosted glass window. A male silhouette pointed a finger in the chest of another silhouette and shouted an obvious dressing down. She couldn't make out what was being said but got the impression things hadn't gone as planned.

No shit.

All at once, the cops in her cantina became animated, taking up positions around the bar, guns drawn.

They probably think they're next.

Outside, one last command was given, and the dejected subordinate was sent off. The man turned toward the door, stopping briefly before pushing it open.

Xochitl grunted, feeling the release of pressure from the middle of her back. A sudden rush of air filled her lungs, and she realized the officer who had his knee dug into her spine had stood up. She felt lightheaded as a dull ache formed at the spot.

That's gonna bruise.

All the cops, save Lowell and the unconscious Gabe Torres, now stood at attention. Only Xochi watched as a lean African-American man, dressed in blues, bars on his lapel and cap on his head, entered.

Must be the captain.

Xochi thought he looked to be in his mid to late fifties. As he approached the other officers, she could tell, even from where she lay, he was on the tall side.

The captain stood in the middle of the cantina, staring at the spectacle of officers Lowell and Torres.

"Lowell, report," he said.

It was eerily quiet while everyone anxiously waited for Lowell to respond, but she never took her eyes off Torres. The SWAT team eyed one another and shifted uncomfortably as the captain grew more irritated with every passing minute. Breaking ranks, a boyish-looking officer with doe eyes holstered his sidearm and double-timed it to his captain.

"Captain Burch, sir. The bar is secure. Several members of East Los Locos are in custody," the officer said. "The ambulance has been called."

"And what about that, Williams?" Captain Burch turned Williams toward Lowell and Torres, still huddled on the floor.

Officer Williams seemed to be at a loss for words. Xochitl felt sorry for him. She didn't envy his position.

What can you say?

"Well, sir...I can't be sure, but I think Officer Torres entered the bar from the back and was hit by gunfire. So, umm...when he was hit...well, umm..." Officer Williams stuttered.

"Spit it out, Williams!"

"Well...he turned into a..."

"Into a what!"

"I think it was a werewolf?" Williams cringed at the last word. Xochitl thought he might faint from the effort.

"A what!" Burch's eyes looked as if they were about to pop out of his skull.

"A werewolf," Williams whispered the words this time.

Xochitl, Williams and the entire SWAT team held their breath, watching Burch in anticipation as he allowed the words to sink in.

The captain's response shocked Xochitl. Instead of the confused horror she felt, and supposed they all felt, Burch turned toward her, stared directly at her, and burst out laughing. Burch was laughing so hard Xochi could see tears forming in his eyes.

"First Parker, now Williams. What's SWAT on? Can I have some?"
Burch mocked the officers. "After tonight, I'll need it."

Anger rose in Xochitl.

How dare this pendejo make fun of us!

"It's true!" The words blasted from Xochi's mouth before she could stop herself. She struggled to stand, her hands still tied behind her back. "We all saw it...Saw something."

Captain Burch stopped short and glared at her. "What?"

With a last grunt, Xochitl got her feet under her, pressed her back against the bottom of the bar and pushed herself up.

"I said we all saw it. Officer Gabe...I mean Torres. He became a monster...or something." Xochitl tried to catch her breath. "He was tearing guys apart. Lowell got him to stop. Then, he just went back to looking like that." She nodded toward Lowell and Torres.

Captain Burch clasped his hands behind him and approached her. Xochi took a defensive step back as Burch loomed over her with a searing stare. The counter pressed painfully against her. The same officers who had zip tied her hands converged on her. Xochitl felt like a caged animal. With a subtle eye motion, Burch signaled to the officer nearest her, and he yanked Xochi by the arm.

"¡Ay, pendejo! Get off me!"

Xochitl struggled to free herself from the cop's grasp to get to Officer Lowell. "Lowell!"

The second officer moved in and grabbed her other arm, and together they dragged Xochi toward the door. "Lowell!"

Desperate, Xochi jammed her body between the door and its frame.

"LUCY!"

Xochi kicked, as the second officer tried to grab her legs. But with her hands tied, she had little balance. The first cop pulled her off her feet

easily, allowing his colleague to seize them. She was hanging between the two men when she heard Lowell.

"Wait. Let her go."

Exhausted and out of breath, Xochi twisted her body in an attempt to see Officer Lucy Lowell. She had removed her jacket and was placing it gently under her partner's head, before resting it on the floor.

Lowell stood and faced Xochi's captors. She stared them down. "I said, let...her...go."

Still hanging between the two men, Xochi peered up at them. Confusion mixed with — *fear?* — crossed their faces. The officers relented and set Xochi's feet on the ground.

"That's right, chota," Xochitl mocked.

Lowell gingerly walked toward Captain Burch. She was favoring her left leg, and she gasped when she put too much weight on it.

"Captain. This is my CI, Xochitl Magaña. This is her bar," Officer Lowell said. "Officer Torres has sustained a bullet wound. We're waiting for EMTs to arrive. ACTF should secure the dogs."

Captain Burch mulled over Lowell's report. He leaned into her and whispered in her ear. Lowell nodded, turned and slowly walked toward Xochitl.

"Why is everyone standing around," Burch yelled. "Do your jobs!"

The cantina was buzzing with activity once more. Paramedics equipped with a gurney rushed in, nearly bowling Xochitl over. Deciding it would be better to get out of the way, she waved Officer Lowell over to the bar.

Lowell winced as she approached the counter. She motioned for Xochi to turn around. Xochi was confused. Lowell rolled her eyes and pulled out a pocketknife.

Oh.

Xochi turned around and held her arms out as Officer Lowell swiftly cut her ties. "Thanks." Xochitl rubbed her red wrists.

"Captain Burch wants you to give a statement down at the station. I'll see someone gets you there." Officer Lowell began walking toward the door. Xochitl didn't move. "Wait, what about Memo?"

"I'm not sure. Just a minute." Lowell pulled her radio off her belt.

"Anyone see Guillermo Morales, a.k.a. El Gallo?"

"Tell them he went out the window in the ladies room," Xochi said.

Lowell raised her hand to quiet Xochi and spoke into her radio again. "A witness saw him escaping out the ladies room window of Xochitl's Cantina."

Xochitl waited anxiously for someone to respond. There was static and then a male voice.

"No. Morales escaped. We have an APB out on him."

"What!" Xochitl couldn't contain herself. She turned to the police officers who had taken over her bar. "How could you pendejos miss him! He went out the back! You were there! God damn it!"

From across the room Captain Burch yelled, "Officer Lowell, take your CI outside. Now!"

Lowell pulled Xochitl toward the door.

Xochi reared on her. "You said you'd get him. You said we'd be safe."

Xochi could see the shock and hurt on Lowell's face. She knew the cop had been through the wringer tonight. But she couldn't bring herself to care. Not now. Not while Memo was still out there.

Oh, God. Miguel.

Xochitl struggled to walk. The thought of her little brother in danger was enough to bring her to her knees. But Officer Lowell had a tight grip on her and kept her from falling.

Lowell stopped, transfixed on Officer Torres who was strapped to a gurney, being wheeled out by the paramedics. Without another word, Xochitl and Lucy slowly followed behind her wounded partner into the early morning darkness.