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Opening Extract from...

Lola

Written by Melissa Scrivner Love

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LOLA

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ONE

HEAT

Lola stands across the craggy square of backyard she shares with Garcia. He mans the grill, rusted tongs and Corona with lime in hand, making the center of a cluster of men, their biceps bare and beaded with sweat, Crenshaw Six tattoos evident in their standard uniform of wife-beaters and torn cargo pants. If Lola were alone with Garcia, she would take her turn over the smoking meat, too, but as afternoon transforms Huntington Park from light to shadow, Lola stays away from the heat. Her place now is at the center of a cluster of women, their necks craning toward any high-pitched squeak that might be gossip, each one standing with a single hip cocked, as if at any second someone might place a sleeping child there for comfort.

Kim speaks loudest, her voice loose change clinking on delicate glass.

"Chicas gotta be buzzin' around, like we don't know what game they runnin'. I were you, Lola, I'd tell that bitch to stay the fuck away from my man."

Lola's eyes find a younger girl, no more than seventeen, weaving too close to the men, Garcia in particular. Lola can't blame her. The entire neighborhood is aware of Garcia's chosen profession.

In Huntington Park, a ghetto suburb of Los Angeles just east of

South Central, a legit man has two choices: landscaping for off-the-books Westside white cash, or sweating through twelve-hour shifts at a factory in Vernon. The lucky factory bodies get Sara Lee; the unlucky are stuck with the fat-rendering plants, where they operate gleaming metal machines that dissolve flesh and bone to liquid.

Garcia does not make his living either way, because he is not a legit man. He is the leader of the Crenshaw Six. Everyone at this barbecue could recite the corners the gang controls, from the retirement home off Gage and State to the middle-school crossing at Marconi. Despite this knowledge, no one is willing to risk a good rack of ribs and a cold Corona over a few moral scruples. Drugs are an understandable, if not respectable, way to make a living in the ghettos of Los Angeles, and the Crenshaw Six members have their own rules—no selling to kids, no soliciting to old folks unless they're in pain. The gang's code keeps the community appeased, and everyone, those who make their living legally and those who rely on committing felonies to survive, coexists. Everyone likes ribs, Lola had told Garcia when she first brought up the idea of throwing a party.

Garcia didn't want to host this barbecue. He was tired from work, business being good, though neither one of them would ever use that expression for fear of the inevitable fall from success. Their tiny nugget of South Central Los Angeles—or so they consider it, even though they've just missed the eastern border—with its strip mall Laundromats, grease-slicked taquerias, and glass-fronted bail bond offices, is no Wall Street. There are no second chances, no getting back on one's feet. Nobody here has enough time for a comeback. Instead of minimum sentences at white-collar resorts, people here get bullets to the head, either victims of circumstance or mere collateral damage. The success stories are few and far between, and they never last.

Still, Lola had told Garcia they should spend a little of their extra cash, show their neighbors a good time. Like normal people who've had some good fortune—dole out free food and beer, generate some goodwill and community spirit. She had won what never

became an argument, Garcia shrugging and saying, "I'll buy the meat."

Now, watching the younger girl scout her man, Lola feels a surge of something she can't name. Someone wants what she, Lola, has. Garcia, aside from a passing glance at tits and ass, ignores the girl. The other men follow suit, sizing her up, approving her, then continuing to talk what Lola assumes is business, although she can't hear over her circle of women, squawking about who's packed on pounds and which neighborhood nail salons overcharge.

Lola nods agreement—she'll never go back to Oasis Nails—then continues to watch the men. Jorge, a round-faced banger in baggy jeans, his ball cap turned backward, texts on one of the Crenshaw Six's jailbroken iPhones. Because the phones don't connect to any mainstream network, Jorge is free to say what he wants. Marcos, a wiry, hardened man with sunken black eyes, sneaks an undercooked rib from the grill and tears into it with pointy teeth. At his feet, Valentine, the pit bull Lola stole from a fighting ring a year ago, waits for a stray piece of flesh. The dog, Lola's baby girl, is the sole female allowed around the grill. Valentine must have recognized an outsider in Marcos, the only member of the Crenshaw Six to have done time, six years in federal max when he was arrested on his eighteenth birthday. Marcos has been out over three years. Still, he eats when there is food, sleeps when there is a chair, fucks when a girl presents herself, as this girl is doing now. Lola guesses Marcos is eating first because he, like the other men, knows the girl will be there whenever he decides to acknowledge her. The ribs, however, will disappear into hungry neighborhood mouths as soon as Garcia transfers them from grill to platter.

Lola wants to pull the prowling girl aside, tell her if she wants to try to screw one of these bangers, fine, but stalking back and forth like a wannabe ghetto runway model is not the way.

"Girl knows to go after the leader," Kim interrupts, catching Lola staring.

"She's nothing," Lola says.

"He's been got before, is all," Kim says, because before Garcia

was Lola's, he belonged to Kim. "Bet if Carlos were here, she'd be after him, too. Women like that, they always want the man in charge."

The women around them freeze, knowing Kim's words are meant to wound Lola, who has dated two gang leaders in quick succession. But all Lola feels is a quick drop of her heart, thinking of Carlos, Kim's older brother, who was the leader of the Crenshaw Six before he was murdered three years ago. Back then Carlos was Lola's man, and Garcia was Kim's. The Crenshaw Six was the Crenshaw Four, with only Carlos, Garcia, Jorge, and Marcos as members. Under Carlos's reign, the gang didn't control any corners, instead relying on sticking up other gangs over shitty coffee tables used to cut coke and heroin. It should have surprised no one that Carlos wound up shot in the face, dumped in the Angeles National Forest along with countless other bodies not expected to be missed.

Kim misses Carlos, though, calling the cops once a month for updates on his as-of-yet unsolved case. Lola feels for Kim. Carlos was charismatic, buoyant, beloved by the neighborhood, Lola included. Yet Kim is the only one who doesn't seem to realize the cops aren't going to do shit to find out who killed some brown ghetto Robin Hood.

"Carlos were here, he'd have burned the meat 'cause he'd be off talking to everyone," Lola says now, diffusing the tension and scattering titters of laughter through the ladies of the neighborhood.

"Or eating my chocolate cake." Kim puffs up, never missing a chance to bring up the one recipe she has that's renowned in their twenty square blocks of Los Angeles.

"You bring some of that today, Kim?" a neighborhood woman asks.

"Damn right I did," Kim says to a resounding chorus of "that's rights" and "shit yeahs." Kim discusses the dessert she brought to the barbecue with the same intensity she used when discussing the girl trolling Garcia. "Not as good as Lola's," Kim adds, as if making the best chocolate cake in the neighborhood is all Lola needs to keep her happy in her little backyard of barrio heaven.

Lola hears awkward murmurs from the other women, each of them split somewhere between protests and agreement. They don't want to insult Kim or Lola, but they know Kim makes a better cake.

"I always use your recipe," Lola says to Kim, smoothing over the moment.

"Oh." Kim blushes, or maybe she's just wearing too much makeup. "Well, you got better things to do, don't you? College and all."

Lola attended two night classes at East Los Angeles Community College before Carlos died. This fact has somehow cemented her as a college girl, despite her dropping out after her former boyfriend's murder, and the term is not necessarily a compliment. Here in Huntington Park, "college girl" means Lola dared to want more. She knows none of these women has a clue what she does all day. Lola doesn't mind. She prefers the periphery, where she can move without notice.

"Must be why you haven't gotten around to pulling the weeds around the flower bed," Kim continues, gesturing with her bloodred press-on nails to a patch of dirt Lola has never bothered to tend.

"That was Carlos's thing," Lola says, because when he was alive, the backyard of this rental house used to burst with sunflowers. Garcia doesn't know how to plant, and Lola doesn't know how to tend, so together they keep the grass clipped and, for the most part, stay on the concrete that borders the back of the house.

"Yeah," Kim agrees. "Garcia got one of those black thumbs, kills every green thing he touches," she explains to the other women, reminding them she once shared a home with Lola's man.

Lola steals another glance at Garcia now, only to find him looking back at her. They smile at each other—a simple, shy smile, even after three years together. She wonders if tragedy would change her feelings toward him. She wonders when they will be tested, if the day will come when they look at each other and think, *Who the fuck is that person I thought I knew?*

"What's up?" Lola hears the unmistakable half grin in the voice of her baby brother, Hector, who has emerged from her kitchen

with a can of salt and a bag of limes. Either item could be for the meat or for the beer, but his question is, without a doubt, directed at the ghetto girl.

"Nothing. Hungry," the girl purrs.

The other men give Hector smacking pats on the back and grunts of approval. He is one of them, a fact Lola had to make peace with years ago. Hector has been her baby brother since she was eight years old, and Maria Vasquez ended up queasy and pregnant from one of the nameless men who rotated out of their house every couple of weeks. No one knows Hector's father's identity, which is fine with Lola. He is her brother, even if they don't share a father. Lola knows her own father's first name—Enrique—but since he left two months after her birth, she tells herself she doesn't care enough to remember his last.

Now, Lola feels a glimmer of hope that eighteen-year-old Hector might settle down with someone from the neighborhood, someone close to his age, someone who would keep him near her, Lola. Then Lola sees the look her baby brother shoots at her, wanting to make sure his sister is watching, and she realizes his flirting is all for show. Hector has a girl in the wrong part of town, and he knows Lola doesn't approve of her. In his own way, Hector is trying to console Lola by flirting with this neighborhood skank. The realization both angers and touches Lola.

"Your brother's puttin' on a show," Kim remarks.

Lola is fine with Kim crying over Carlos's flower bed and reminding the neighborhood Lola's man used to fuck her. Kim is not allowed to comment on Lola's baby brother, Lola decides now, her face flushing. She needs an escape.

She spots the Amaros ducking through the chain-link fence, the husband and wife pair moving with bowed heads. They are middle-aged, which here means early forties, with crinkled potato chip skin and eyes sunk too deep in their faces. They are old before their time, people outside South Central would say, but here they just are.

"Gonna say hi to the Amaros," Lola gives her excuse to Kim and the other women.

"Tacos," Juan Amaro says in greeting, and, on cue, his wife,

Juanita, holds up a large foil pan. The Amaros are the only guests to have brought a disposable dish. They own a combination bodega and taco stand, getting all their supplies below cost from a shady distant cousin. Everyone else will have to wait while Lola soaks their respective glass dishes in warm, soapy water and gives them back, streaked with residual cheese scabs from their neighbors' casseroles and potluck enchiladas, but the Amaros can make a quick escape.

Lola reaches for the tacos as she smiles her welcome.

"Chicken, beef, and pork. There wasn't any good fish today," Juanita Amaro says, an apology present in her soft voice.

"Don't need it, with all this," Lola says.

"Told her not to worry about it," Juan mutters, and Juanita bows her head deeper, eyes on her feet. They're only a few miles from the Pacific, but it might as well be a world—all the good stuff goes to the Westside, where celebrity chefs in Venice, Santa Monica, and Malibu pluck the finest from the day's catch.

"I'll take these to the kitchen," Lola says. She sees a shadow at the corner of Juanita Amaro's skirt. Big brown eyes emerge from behind the cotton, and there is the Amaros' granddaughter. Lola has only seen the girl, whose name she can't remember now, once or twice before, perched on a corner stool in her grandparents' bodega, punching numbers into an old dead adding machine.

"Lucy, greet your hostess." Juanita nudges her granddaughter forward, but Lucy clings to the woman's cotton skirt.

Lucy. That's the girl's name. Lucy belongs to the Amaros' junkie daughter, Rosie, who appeared in Huntington Park last month, Lucy in tow, after years in Bakersfield doing God knows what to score her fix.

A sticky sheen that could be sweat or old milk or remnants of today's lunch coats Lucy's cheeks and forehead. Someone has taken the trouble to give the little girl's face a cursory wipe, but the job was so poorly executed it has served only to smear an even layer of the sticky substance over Lucy's cheeks and tiny button nose.

"Hola, Lucy," Lola tries. She doesn't know if Lucy prefers English or Spanish.

Lucy stares up at Lola.

"Lucy, what do you say?" Juanita prods her granddaughter, a weathered hand, bony fingered, tightening on Lucy's shoulder.

Lola doesn't like to see Juanita Amaro's claw sinking into her granddaughter's shoulder, prodding Lucy to give attention or affection, so she throws her head in the direction of the house. "Wanna help me in the kitchen?"

Lucy looks up at her grandmother, unsure of how to answer.

"Yes, she does," Juanita says, her claw of a finger poking Lucy forward, toward Lola.

"Yes," Lucy repeats, too loud, but the noise of the party doesn't stop as the little girl follows Lola, picking her way through trodden grass and weeds sprouting from dry drought dirt, the yard of a family with no landscaper, even though there are plenty who live in the neighborhood.

In the kitchen, more women—older than the ones gathered outside with their vodka cranberries and bloodred press-on nails—bustle. In here, the women are thicker from ass to earring. They speak only Spanish, as if it's some secret code Lola and the younger ones don't understand.

"No, it was his ex-girlfriend's mother's cousin—" Lola catches from one of the women.

"Lottie's girl?"

"No, Lottie was dead by then. You remember her husband? The one with the hammer toe?"

"Ohhhhh. . . ." A chorus of collective remembrance fills the tiny kitchen, where maternal bodies touch hip to hip. Their symphony is composed of deeper voices than that of the younger women outside. In here, it's a cacophony of decades-old cigarettes and fucking and family—followed by the clapping of Lola's rusting oven door as one of the thick women opens it. Something steaming hot and smelling of melted queso emerges, encased in a glass dish Lola recognizes as her own. The women ignore Lola, even though it is her kitchen. They have co-opted it for themselves, with no explanation, and they never asked permission to use either her appliances or her dishes.

Lola knows it is because they believe they know better than her how to use them. They are right.

"Lola," another one coos. Veronica, her mother's oldest friend, approaches with a wet paper towel.

"What's that for?" Lola asks.

"Lipstick," Veronica explains.

"What lipstick?"

Veronica kisses Lola with hot pink lips, then dabs at the stain she's left on Lola's cheek. The women laugh, shrill ringing that fills the room, heating it up more than the open oven alone.

"Veronica," Lola says, soft, but the other women catch the chiding tone in her voice and turn on her. Lola is not supposed to speak this way to Veronica, her elder.

She changes the subject. "Where's Kim's chocolate cake? People're asking for it."

"Kim made the cake?" Veronica asks. "I thought you were going to."

The room is so quiet Lola can hear the drippy faucet Garcia promised to fix. The hippy-ass women all face her, waiting.

"Other stuff to do." Lola shrugs. "But the guys want it."

The room snaps back into motion, ringed and bare fingers wringing, all with a task—find Kim's cake, where is Kim's cake, the men want it. Lola can't hear the words, just the voices, low hums and hems and questions. She weaves through the warm bodies to Lucy, catching the little girl yawning in the stifling oven heat.

"Are you tired?" she asks the little girl.

Lucy tries to stifle a second yawn as she shakes her head. Lola catches the little girl's fleeting glance outside, to the circle of men surrounding the smoldering grill.

Lola thinks of her own junkie mother, of the men she introduced Lola to, of the things Lola had to do for these men at night so that Maria Vasquez could score her own fix. Lola thinks of all the sleep she lost losing her innocence.

Now, Lola lowers herself to Lucy's level and speaks so only the two of them can hear. "Are you scared of the men out there?"

Lucy hesitates, and Lola keeps her distance, not touching the girl, but staying down here with her. After a few seconds, Lucy nods.

"I understand," Lola says. "Would you like a safe place to sleep?"

Lucy stares at Lola, licking her lips, wanting to say yes.

"I can show you how to lock the door," Lola says. "You can follow me if you like, or you can stay here. Either way, I won't be upset."

Lola rises, slow, so as not to frighten Lucy. She leaves the kitchen and heads down the narrow hallway where three doors creak open to bedrooms.

The room Lola enters is plain white—white walls, white ceiling fan, buzzing white air conditioner percolating in the window, white bars outside it. Lola doesn't know who it's for—guests? But no one ever comes to stay with her and Garcia. The room belongs in an institution, one where patients need their minds wiped clean. Maybe it is perfect for Lucy, who looks like she didn't sleep last night. Lola wishes it were just Lucy hearing her mother shoot up in the next room keeping the little girl awake, but Lucy's look outside to the men hints at something more sinister.

Lola stops these thoughts. There is no point. She is not Lucy's mother. There is nothing she can do to save this child.

She hears a floorboard creak and turns to find Lucy, staring at the lock on the white door.

"Here," Lola says. "Let me show you."

Lola helps Lucy practice with the lock. "Righty-tighty, lefty-loosey," Lola repeats as Lucy locks to the right, unlocks to the left. She can't remember where she learned the saying, but she likes sharing it with Lucy now. She may not be able to save this child, but she can give Lucy an hour's reprieve in this white room, so that is what she does. She lowers the dusty blinds. Lola turns out the lights, even though outside the sinking sun is still too bright, the shadow-streaked sky still too blue. Lucy needs dull—grays and whites. Lola wishes she had a teddy bear for the little girl to squeeze. If Lucy is dealing with what Lola thinks, though, a locked bedroom door will give her more comfort than any teddy bear.

Lola shuts the bedroom door behind her and waits in the hall-

way until she hears the padding of little feet, then the click of the lock. The walls are so thin she can hear Lucy sigh as she sinks into clean sheets.

Lola will wait outside the door until the little girl has had enough time to fall asleep. The women's voices in the kitchen dull to a buzz. The changing light outside shifts the shadows in the house. No one will look for her here.

The sharp knock at the front door interrupts Lola's respite. The women's kitchen chatter silences quick as a blaring television switched off.

The only people who knock on front doors in this neighborhood are cops who've exchanged their battering rams for bad news.

From the hallway, Lola can see through the master bedroom's small square of window to the backyard. Garcia is still charring meat, sporting the same smile he wore half an hour ago. No one outside heard the knock. They are still living in a party.

When Lola opens the door, her breath catches in her tiny cavern of a chest. The man standing there is not a cop. He is Mexican, not Mexican American, like everyone else here. He wears a tailored suit and steel-toed boots. Lola searches his face for a bead of sweat but comes up empty. She has never met him, but she knows his name. Everyone in this neighborhood does. They call him El Coleccionista, the Collector.

"Hola," she says, tucking an ankle behind a calf and tilting her chin down, playing dumb. Luckily, Lola spent the first twenty-three years of her life, until she met Garcia, figuring out how to make sure men didn't feel threatened by her. It is a skill that has served her better than any chocolate cake recipe ever will.

"Garcia," El Coleccionista says.

"Out back," Lola responds, planning to dart ahead, pretending a tour of the house, ending with the master bedroom, so she can signal to her man.

But El Coleccionista doesn't wait for an invitation. He steps forward, and Lola steps to the side, losing the game of chicken her guest wasn't playing.

Lola follows him into the kitchen, where the now-silent older

women are not so good at playing dumb. They, too, know this man's identity, and they are too stunned to see him here, in the chipping yellow paint and burnt-out fluorescence of Lola's kitchen, to hide that knowledge. Lola hears only the vent over the stove blowing its constant neutral air and the click of Garcia's boss's boots on her linoleum, which is gleaming clean but bent up at the corners.

The man on her heels, his breath so close she can smell his most recent mint, once led the cartel crew that invaded a small Mexican town, taking out dozens of civilians in under twenty minutes—doctors, lawyers, cops, housewives, children, criminals—all because one citizen was harboring a witness against the Los Liones cartel. That guy, the witness, El Coleccionista spared, only to draw and quarter him with four Honda Civics the next day. Even that small car could tear a man limb from limb in less time than it took the cartel to mow down dozens of the would-be witness's innocent neighbors. But El Coleccionista made sure his death took over half an hour, and he recorded the man's screams.

El Coleccionista gave a copy of the death to Garcia the day they started working together—a preemptive warning. The Crenshaw Six were allowed to work their six corners in Huntington Park with cartel shit, and the cartel would even throw in a few extra corners for good measure, but the Crenshaw Six better cut them in on the profits. And they better not fuck it up.

Lola needs to warn Garcia. El Coleccionista's boots move in a calm one, two rhythm across her kitchen floor. Lola takes off, ducking between padded female bodies that reek of perfume and grease, taking the long way outside, through the laundry room, where Garcia's boxers thunk and click in the dryer. She rounds the house, breathless, and Garcia sees her face. *He's here,* she mouths, and Garcia is the only one who sees her.

Everyone else has turned to watch El Coleccionista taking the cement steps down from the kitchen door, never breaking the rhythm of his stride. One, two, one, two.

The entire yard quiets, the neighborhood stills. Somewhere in the distance, a bird tweets, and then the neighbor from two streets over starts his shitty car to a booming backfire. No one jumps. They

are all staring at El Coleccionista. Everyone has only seen his picture, or they know him from his clothes. No one here dresses like that.

"Garcia," El Coleccionista says. Lola can't be sure if he has an accent, since this is the only word she's heard him say.

Garcia hands his beer to Lola, who has migrated to the spot behind his right shoulder. It's her place. An automatic safe zone. The beer is sweating—Garcia wasn't drinking it. He doesn't drink much, and beer has never been his choice. He has only been pretending at playing house this whole time. So has she.

She hopes Garcia's boss isn't here to kill them all. Still, Lola doesn't feel fear. This Mexican thug wants the little lady scared, and she plays it that way. She holds Garcia's beer and makes sure not to look directly at his boss. But she knows his secret—El Coleccionista is middle management.

She wishes only that Los Liones had sent someone higher up. El Coleccionista doles out messages and punishments. He doesn't call the shots.

"Inside," El Coleccionista says. Slight accent. Lola has no accent in English or Spanish. The thought comforts her as Garcia follows the man into the house. She can hear the scatter of thick older women on her aging linoleum, then they all break into the backyard, hands still wringing, hens running out of a fox-invaded coop.

After Carlos's murder three years ago, the Crenshaw Six transitioned from stickup crew with no turf to call their own to bona fide gang with six corners no one else would touch because of their proximity to schools and police stations and nursing homes. The cartel has probably always supplied the product the Crenshaw Six peddles, but until recently, the gang was too low in the pecking order to know more than the identity of their loser tweaker of a middleman, Benny, who carried an empty pistol and an eye twitch everywhere he went.

Then, two months ago, El Coleccionista sought out Garcia, the small-time South Central dealer, because the LAPD had seized one of Darrel King's warehouses. The cartel wanted to keep product flowing to its dedicated customers, and they couldn't do that

when Darrel, their largest dealer, was out of commission. Would Garcia be willing to do his part and take on a few more corners to keep his neighborhood flush with quality smack?

It was the break the Crenshaw Six needed. Perhaps El Coleccionista has stopped in this evening to give Garcia a friendly employee evaluation. Lola knows that isn't it, though. Garcia has stuck to the cartel's terms, allowing Crenshaw Six soldiers to sell the cartel's product only on the additional corners Los Liones gave them. Even with the added turf, the Crenshaw Six controls only a molecular sliver of Los Liones's middleman Darrel's fifty-one point zero eight square miles of South Central pie. Garcia has followed the Crenshaw Six's own principles, including never selling to kids, as well as the cartel's only declaration—turn a profit. He hasn't tried for a power grab. He has worked hard and humble, and the thought makes Lola swell with what she imagines is pride.

As the guests cluck and spit and swig more alcohol, faces paling, voices silent, Lola is sure she knows why El Coleccionista is here.