



# Daring

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**Category:** Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** A rebellious streak, a shot of tequila, and a questionable decision. This disastrous combination will intertwine the paths of Abigail and Gretel at the most inconvenient moment.

Abigail, tired of always doing the right thing, meets Gretel, the perfect wife abandoned by a jerk of a husband.

Fate leads both women to drown their sorrows in the same bar. One becomes the confidante of the other. In the end, a bit tipsy from alcohol, they decide it's time to rebel and indulge in mischief to feel alive.

Their little misdeed involves stealing a car, nothing too serious in their eyes. They plan to take it for a spin and park it safely afterward. What could go wrong? They quickly choose their target and devise a distraction plan to achieve their goal.

Everything goes smoothly, and the two women feel euphoric for pulling it off until they discover they're not alone on their joyride.

**Total Pages (Source):** 37

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## Chapter 1

Gretel slams the door shut, her back pressed against the landing wall, desperately sucking in the air.

"Gretel, don't be dramatic. Don't take it like this," Pol whispers as he opens the door again.

"Don't take it like this," she mutters, the son of a bitch. Four years of fighting tooth and nail. Lately, things haven't been rosy, but she's tried every damn day not to throw it all away. And now, after a day's work, he drops the bomb – he wants a divorce, claims he's fallen for someone else.

"Come on, come in, let's talk," he pleads, looking stressed.

"There's nothing to talk about. You've already decided for both of us," she replies, a couple of tears escaping, pride preventing a full-on breakdown.

"The last thing I wanted was to hurt you, Gretel. You have to believe me."

"Don't talk to me," she says, raising a hand.

She approaches him, shoving him back into the house as he stares, dumbfounded. Pol, misinterpreting her intentions, wonders if she's angling for one last nostalgic romp. But all Gretel wants now is to get him out of her sight. Once he's inside, she grabs her bag and slams the door even harder than before.

Checking the time, she sighs, trying to focus. Gretel is certain her coordination is off – her soon-to-be ex-husband's bombshell caught her so off guard she can't process the information.

Certainly, the weekend won't unfold as planned. In her ideal weekend, Pol arrives on this Friday evening after a week-long business trip. She would have a sumptuous dinner ready while he showers. After catching up on his trip, they'd retreat to the bedroom. She'd debut a new lingerie set, the kind that drives him wild – the very set she's wearing now. They'd make love until exhaustion.

Pol arrives on time, they have dinner after his much-needed shower, according to Gretel, who finds him smelling like a goat. Instead of discussing his trip, he drops the divorce bomb. Out of the blue, no anesthesia. Initially, she thinks he's pulling her leg, but the panic in his eyes tells her that her nearly perfect world has just crumbled.

It's half-past nine in the evening. The logical move would be to go inside, grab some clothes, and crash at her brother's place for a few days – process the chaos that's just erupted and figure out the wreckage of her life. That would be the norm. But right now, all she craves is to drown in one of those historic benders. Thirty-six years of playing by the rules, and where has it landed her? Four years of marriage, another four of dating, and in less than a minute, she's back to square one.

She starts descending the stairs, but after two steps, she realizes her legs are still shaking from the shock and bewilderment of the unexpected bombshell. So, instead of risking a fatal fall on the day she's been dumped, she turns around and hits the elevator.

While descending, she pulls out her phone and searches for her best friend Sonia's number. About to hit the call button, she pauses, releasing a frustrated snort. What she really wants is to hit a bar, spill her guts to Sonia, and drink until her brain shuts down. But Sonia has a little one, and she's not about to ditch motherhood for a night

out with her freshly dumped friend. Another pang of desolation hits her – all her friends have their lives figured out, and she's utterly alone.

Screw it, nobody's ruining her plan, she decides. She steps onto the street and starts walking toward downtown. She's not a regular at bars, unsure of the best spot, but considering her day and life have turned into a mess, any dive will do.

After half an hour lost in her thoughts, she nears the commercial area and spots a place that grabs her attention. A couple of groups of people are outside, smoking, holding beer bottles, laughing, and whispering. She glances inside; it seems pretty packed, perfect for blending in. Plus, there's a pool table and a dartboard. Maybe, after a few drinks, she'll muster the courage to challenge a stranger and wipe the floor with them in both games.

Determined, Gretel strides in, feeling the weight of curious gazes. This seems like the typical neighborhood bar where everyone more or less knows each other, and she's the odd one out – the novelty of the night. She settles onto an empty stool at the bar and orders a beer.

"Draft or bottle?" asks a tall, sickly-looking bartender.

"Bottle."

As the bottle lands before her, she takes a long swig and scans the crowd. The music hums at an acceptable volume, not too low to be ignored nor too high to make her want to flee.

Turning back to the bar, discomfort hits as she realizes she's not only the sole woman flying solo but also the lone soul without company. The place isn't packed, but for a Friday night just kicking off, it's surprisingly lively. The beer finishes, and she contemplates leaving.

"Another?" startles the bartender, and Gretel hesitates.

"Yes, please," she says finally, unsure why.

She savors the second beer a bit more. The alcohol begins to numb her, offering a modicum of relief. She thinks of Pol and repeats like a mantra that she'll be better off without him, that she doesn't need him. She never quite liked the apartment they shared, but Pol insisted on buying it because it was close to his work, despite her having to transfer twice to reach hers.

"Selfish bastard," she mutters under her breath before taking another sip, leaving the bottle halfway empty.

She's made up her mind; they'll sell the apartment, and with her share, she'll rent another. Maybe she'll move to a new city and finally open the churro stand she's always dreamed of.

The sharp thud of a briefcase hitting the bar startles her, making her bounce on the stool. Gretel turns and sees a woman around forty settling next to her. A picture-perfect powerful executive, clad in a form-fitting suit that suits her perfectly. Her hair, initially a pristine bun, now sports playful, tousled strands, giving her a mischievous and carefree charm that captivates Gretel.

"Give me a shot of tequila," the woman says after checking her phone, pocketing it with a huff, as if the device is to blame for her crappy day.

The executive turns momentarily, giving Gretel a chance to study her near-perfect features. The woman's stern and furrowed face glances at her for a split second, and Gretel feels like, in that brief moment, she's been thoroughly analyzed and a profile has been crafted.

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This woman, in Gretel's eyes, exudes confidence. Someone intelligent, accustomed to swimming with sharks, capable of spotting them with just a glance. Gretel, however, doesn't see herself as a shark; she's more like a trout about to be ensnared in a fishing net, waiting to be gutted.

"Tequila here," the bartender announces, placing the tiny glass in front of the woman. She pours salt into her hand, licks it in a mesmerizing manner that captures Gretel's attention, and downs the shot in one go.

"Another one for me," the woman surprises the bartender, "and one for her too; I think she needs it."

"On it," the pale man responds to Gretel's stunned gaze.

"I'm Abigail," the stranger introduces herself before savoring the taste the lemon left on her lips.

"I'm Gretel," Gretel replies breathlessly, "like Hansel and Gretel, you know..." She waits for the usual mocking comment that people usually make upon hearing her name for the first time, but Abigail remains unfazed.

"Gretel," Abigail repeats, nodding. "I like it."

Before Gretel can say anything else, the bartender is already before them, filling two new tequila glasses. Although Gretel has never tried it, she doesn't hesitate, following Abigail's ritual – licking the salt off her hand, gulping the liquid in one go, and biting the lemon as the fiery liquid scorches her esophagus like a lava tongue.

"Damn," she mutters, placing the glass on the bar, feeling the heat redden her cheeks.

When she looks up, Abigail is watching her with the most incredible and captivating half-smile she has ever seen.

"You're the most fun I've had today," Abigail confesses, never breaking eye contact.  
"Bad day?"

"My husband just asked for a divorce," Gretel says between coughs. "How can you drink this stuff?"

Gretel grimaces, and Abigail lets out a genuine, deep laugh, the kind that comes from the core, leaving Gretel captivated once again.

"Two more!" she yells at the bartender across the bar.

"Are you crazy?" laughs Gretel, bewildered yet captivated by the executive's presence.

"The first one's the challenge, but the second one's a damn delight, you'll see," Abigail asserts with such certainty that Gretel can't help but believe her.

"Bad day for you too?" Gretel asks.

"I've had a bad year," Abigail responds with a sigh.

"Executive?"

"I guess my clothes give it away," Abigail replies, glancing at herself.

"And the briefcase," Gretel points out. "Can I ask what you do?"

"Family business. Supposedly, my two brothers and I are meant to run the company, but I'm the one doing the heavy lifting while they blow money on women, travels, and unjustifiable meals, and my father does nothing about it."

"Rough," Gretel comments, imagining the desperation of her new companion.

Two new shots appear, and Gretel realizes Abigail is right. She savors the second one with surprising finesse, though the alcohol's potent effects begin to flow through her veins, causing a slight dizziness. She runs a hand over her face and blinks a couple of times.

"Wanna play pool?" Abigail proposes.

"I'd love to."

## Chapter 2

The two women rise and head toward the pool table. They leave Abigail's briefcase and jackets on chairs at a nearby table, and Gretel inserts a coin.

"Do you come here often?" Gretel asks while setting up the balls.

Abigail stares at them and suddenly realizes it's been so long since she played that she's forgotten the proper order.



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"First time," Abigail replies. "Let me handle it."

Gretel steps aside, letting Abigail take the lead. As the executive arranges the balls in the triangle, Gretel fixates on her seemingly soft hands, meticulously manicured with only a glossy finish. She glances at her own, wondering why she doesn't keep them as immaculate, then remembers she doesn't earn enough for a manicure.

Abigail breaks the game with a crisp, forceful strike, scattering the balls without sinking any.

"Pick your shots. What do you want to drink?" Abigail hands her the cue with such determination that Gretel can't refuse.

"Ever been told 'no' to anything?" she asks without thinking.

Abigail smirks, focusing her eyes as if the question, rather than surprising her, pleased her.

"Sorry," Gretel apologizes, aware that the alcohol is loosening her tongue.

"Don't be sorry. Never regret saying what you think. And no, I'm not used to hearing 'no,'" Abigail admits with a tone so seductive that Gretel isn't sure if she's joking or serious.

"A beer," Gretel says to change the subject.

Abigail confidently heads to the bar and returns with two bottles, placing them on the

table with their belongings. Gretel chooses the solid balls and, when she bends down to aim, realizes she must focus to prevent the balls from warping.

"I think I shouldn't drink more," she laughs, then hits the balls, sinking two by sheer luck.

"Wow," exclaims Abigail, "looks like you haven't had enough."

She props herself on the table, lifting one leg to the knee, letting her foot dangle as she offers Gretel a bottle and invites her to a toast.

"To the women who can't stand jerk men."

Gretel laughs, toasts, and takes a long sip that further loosens her inhibitions.

"Actually, I was putting up with it. Now that I think about it, I have no idea why. The relationship had cooled a while ago. I tried, you know?" she says, taking another sip as Abigail listens attentively. "Sometimes I wasn't sure if I wanted to, but then I'd think about the eight years we had together and convince myself I couldn't just toss them aside. Me trying to salvage the relationship while he screwed around with others," she laments, exhaling.

"I'm sorry," Abigail says, unable to look away from Gretel.

Gretel strikes her as a woman both transparent and enigmatic. An air of mystery surrounds her, captivating Abigail without clear reason, as Gretel seems adept at expressing her worries and concerns.

"And you, are you married?" she asks, her cheeks flushed with warmth.

"No, never have been, and don't intend to be, at least not with a man. I have enough

dealing with my family," Abigail responds.

Gretel looks at her with wide eyes, nodding as if she understands, though a profound confusion simmers within her.

"Do you like women?" the question spills from her lips before she can contemplate its appropriateness. Yet, she doesn't regret it. She desires to know, especially as Abigail gazes at her with that mix of amusement and seduction, unsettling her.

"I don't just like them, they drive me crazy," Abigail asserts firmly. She steps down from the table, allowing Gretel to take her shot again.

Gretel does, but Abigail's response has left her so nervous that she fumbles the shot clumsily, barely grazing the white ball and causing it to move only a couple of inches.

"It's my turn," Abigail says, extending her hand for the cue.

Leaning over the table, Abigail's presence makes Gretel hold her breath. She wonders if her husband had ever made her feel this trapped. She can't pinpoint what it is about Abigail whether it's her confidence, the magnetic pull that makes everything around her orbit, or that gaze leaving her emotionally exposed. Try as she might, her eyes fixate on Abigail's cleavage. Abigail's shirt has shifted due to gravity, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of her breasts that sparks Gretel's imagination in a way she can't recall ever happening before.

Abigail's precision strikes the ball, leaving the white orb stationary as the striped orange rockets into a corner. The executive straightens, eyes fixed on the table, while Gretel watches, her heart pounding. Abigail rises again, this time from the side, her cleavage hidden, yet Gretel notices the strands of hair cascading down her neck like a gentle caress, suspended in the air. Another shot, another ball sinks. Gretel, typically

skilled at the game, feels the alcohol clouding her mind, wondering if it's the reason for the strange sensations Abigail stirs in her.

"Do you ever feel like you're living a life that isn't yours?" Abigail asks, handing Gretel the cue after losing her turn.

Gretel takes the cue, brows furrowed, contemplating, and remains still, gazing at Abigail, who looks back as if they're the only two in the bar.

"Yeah," she nods, "damn right I've felt that."

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Abigail's question has stirred such reflection in Gretel that now she's angry with herself.

"I've spent my whole life doing what's expected. A good student, working in an accounting firm because my dad fancied having an accountant daughter when I can't stand math. I let Pol win me over because he was a good man, and his dad was friends with mine. Damn, I've never done anything for myself," she vents, frustrated, while Abigail watches, unblinking. "Do you know I've never even tried weed? Haven't stolen a damn marble as a teenager," she laments, putting the cue aside, grabbing her bottle, and chugging the last of her beer.

"You've been a good girl," Abigail says, devouring her with a look, a smile that leaves Gretel guessing her thoughts.

What Gretel does know is that her legs are trembling, and if Abigail keeps looking at her like that, she might climax right there, in front of everyone.

Gretel's gaze pierces Abigail's eyes, and she swallows hard. "You don't look like the good girl type," Gretel concludes, her words heavy.

"Maybe not as much as you," Abigail concedes, a sly smile playing on her lips. "I've danced with the devil, tasted rebellion. Stole my father's coins from the sofa when he was too lost in the cushions. But, you know, Gretel, my life doesn't feel like mine either."

Gretel, never a fan of her name due to schoolyard taunts, finds it oddly sensual when spoken by Abigail. The air hangs thick with unspoken stories.

"Since I was a kid, they groomed me to carry on the family business. My brothers, they get a bigger share just for being born with a Y chromosome. Yet, here I am, killing myself to keep clients happy, making sure orders are never late. I attend every meeting, work fourteen-hour days to keep the company on top. And where are they?" Gretel vents, frustration lacing her tone. "Dad strolls in to check things, making sure they align with his taste. And it all ticks like clockwork, thanks to me. My brothers? Useless. Always off on supposed client hunts. But what do they bring back lately? Zilch."

Abigail reaches her limit. The fight for a cause that seems to only demand her sacrifice has drained her. Her family fails to see her efforts, oblivious to her need for rest or a break. They assume she should keep doing what she does because she excels at it, a shark in a sea of minnows. But she's weary of the battle. The beer glass empties, and she signals for another round of shots.

Gretel glances at the mounting bill, concern etching her features.

"I can't cover all this," she admits, tallying up their consumption.

"Relax, tonight's on my company," Abigail reassures her, injecting a note of mystery into the statement.

They abandon the game and settle at the table until the shots arrive, downing them in a single gulp. In that moment, Gretel feels like a dragon; a fiery breath could engulf the bar. Abigail can't take her eyes off Gretel. There's an innocence about her that captivates Abigail, and, she admits, she likes Gretel.

"You know what I'd like to do?" Gretel asks, unabashed.

"What?" Abigail leans in, intrigued.

Before entering this bar, Abigail hesitated this isn't her usual scene. But she needed an escape from the numerical chatter, client talk, and contract discussions. She craved a disconnection, and fate led her here. Fate brought her to Gretel, a woman equally frustrated, lost in familial obligations while neglecting her own needs.

"I want to commit a crime," Gretel drops the bomb.

Abigail's lips slowly curve, her gaze unwavering. Now, she's the one studying Gretel, fascination in her eyes, erupting into genuine laughter that infects Gretel, leaving her surrendered. Gretel can't help but think about kissing Abigail, a notion that triggers a coughing fit, nearly choking her.

"Are you okay?" Abigail asks, maintaining that intense gaze.

"Yeah, just went down the wrong pipe," Gretel responds, feeling like she's wearing too much clothing.

"So, you want to commit a crime. We better make sure no one overhears," Abigail continues smiling.

"Wait, don't think I want to murder someone," Gretel corrects hastily. "But, I don't know, something wrong, something to feel that rush of adrenaline," she confesses, a sparkle in her eyes that captivates Abigail. "Of course, without hurting anyone."

"Of course, I get it," Abigail replies.

Abigail lets her hair down, a symbolic act of liberation. Gretel can't help but stare, mouth slightly ajar.

"Let's do it," Abigail decides, leaning forward, causing Gretel's heart to race uncontrollably.

"Do it? Are you serious?" Gretel asks, a mix of nervousness and excitement in her voice.

"Absolutely, who can stop us? We're two grown, strong women making our own decisions, right?" Gretel asserts, a glint of rebellion in her eyes.

Both acknowledge the folly of acting under the influence of alcohol, but they also recognize the regret that would follow if they don't seize this moment. Logic dictates that one of them should be the voice of reason and say no, but neither is inclined to behave that way. After so long without feeling the thrill of excitement, the idea of doing something wrong sends shivers of anticipation down their spines.

"You're right, no one can stop us," Gretel exclaims. "Any ideas?" she asks, scanning their surroundings.

"Yep," Abigail answers, biting her lip. "Let's steal a car."



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### Chapter 3

"A car?" Gretel can't suppress a nervous giggle, glancing around as if the mere thought has summoned the police.

"What? Not up for it?" Abigail challenges, tequila-induced boldness coursing through her veins. She fears nothing now.

"Of course, I'm up for it," Gretel asserts to Abigail's satisfaction. "But where do you want to do it? If we get caught, we're done for," she adds, eyes wide. Yet, the adrenaline coursing through her veins makes her determined.

"A night in the slammer might not be so bad. Ever made love in a place like that?" Abigail jokes.

But for Gretel, time stands still, the air caught in her lungs as she gazes at Abigail, processing the words. Her imagination runs wild, picturing herself straddling Abigail, a profound shift shaking her core, throat suddenly dry.

"No," Gretel hisses so softly that Abigail barely hears, but she reads her lips and smiles, noting the nervous tension that has taken hold of her.

"Maybe we skip the slammer and find a better spot," Abigail insists, unable to contain herself. Watching Gretel's chest rise and fall uncontrollably is making her sick with excitement.

"Drinks on the house," they hear, snapping out of their trance. The somewhat sickly-

looking bartender appears, placing two fresh tequila shots in front of them the perfect catalyst for finalizing their plan.

"In the back, there's a poorly lit dirt parking lot," Abigail explains in a hushed tone, and Gretel listens intently. "We can choose an easy car, an old one without an alarm."

"Okay," Gretel agrees. "But I think there's an easier way," she says, glancing to the side.

"What is it?" Abigail asks, curious.

Gretel points to the corner table, where a trio of men, seemingly fresh out of prison, took a seat a while ago.

"Those are the types who drink until the bar closes," Gretel adds.

Abigail nods in agreement; they haven't finished their first cocktail, and the next round is already on order. In her business dealings, she's encountered such people, usually hiding behind expensive suits and fake smiles.

"Look, they have the car keys right there," Gretel points with a gesture.

Abigail, surprised, realizes her companion is right. She hadn't noticed, but one of them has a mobile phone, a pack of cigarettes, car keys, and even a wallet with a wad of bills laid out on the table.

"The typical show-off who likes to flaunt. Today, he'll blow half of what he has there, and tomorrow the rest. Then, come Monday, he'll go to his boss, asking for an advance to get through the rest of the month," Gretel remarks, as if she can read his mind.

"Wow, quick and accurate assessment. Have you thought something similar about me?" Gretel can't help but ask.

Abigail fixes her brown eyes on her, moistening her lips as if she wants to devour her right then and there a prospect Gretel wouldn't mind.

"No. In you, I've seen a reflection of myself a solitary, wounded, undervalued woman with the potential to conquer the world, wasting it by trying to please others."

"Wow," Gretel exclaims, flattered.

"I've also seen a beautiful woman that I want to kiss more with every passing minute, but that might be beside the point," Abigail drops the bomb, turning to observe their targets as if Gretel isn't right in front of her. Gretel stands frozen, trying to muster the courage to tell her to stop talking and act. Maybe it's the unleashed inhibition, but right now, she'd let Abigail make love to her even in the grimy, urine-scented bathrooms of this place.

"We can distract them, one grabs their attention, and the other snatches the keys," Abigail muses.

"You can't say you want to kiss me and then change the subject like nothing happened," Gretel protests, surprised at herself.

Abigail looks at her, taking a deep breath, a captivating smile playing on her lips, exuding confidence.

"Is it a scolding or your way of asking me to kiss you?"

"Don't be so arrogant. I don't want you to kiss me," Gretel blurts out, half her body trembling.

"No? Well, that's a shame. You've got lips I'm itching to bite," Abigail teases.

"Stop it," Gretel pleads, certain that if Abigail continues with the provocation, she'll have a heart attack. "Can we focus on the car?" she insists, clearing her throat.

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"I can, can you?" Abigail doesn't want to come off as arrogant, but it just happens. Gretel's almost innocent way of looking at her has her fascinated. As if she's never fantasized about a woman when Abigail is sure that's all she's thinking about now.

"Yes, I can. The plan sounds good, distraction and execution. How do we do it?" Gretel impatiently asks to change the subject.

"Alright."

Abigail takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly as if it's part of a ritual before springing into action.

"I'll pay, then we'll both go to the restroom. When we come out, I'll innocently stumble into them, and you'll take advantage of the distraction to grab the keys."

"Sounds good," Gretel agrees, so intoxicated that she fails to see the danger in what they're about to do anywhere.

Abigail stands up, blinking a couple of times to control the slight dizziness she felt. Once composed, she puts on her jacket, grabs the briefcase, and heads to the bar, using the company card for something unrelated to her work for the first time. She feels a momentary guilt, but it fades when she thinks of her brothers and all they waste without a hint of guilt or shame.

When Abigail returns from the bar, and Gretel sees her approaching, she rises so swiftly that the room spins uncontrollably. She stumbles to the side, thinking she'll collapse, but Abigail firmly grabs her waist, pulling her close, preventing her from

falling or moving.

Gretel inhales the scent of vanilla and roses she believes emanates from Abigail, letting her flushed cheek graze Abigail's. In that moment, with closed eyes, she feels secure. Awkwardly, she moves her arms to encircle Abigail in a hug, a gesture both women need more than they realize. Abigail says nothing, keeping her eyes open, gaze fixed on the wall, believing that having a woman embrace her is enough, a lifeline when she feels the world crumbling beneath her.

"Are you ready?" she asks Gretel when she thinks enough time has passed.

"Yes, sorry. Remind me never to drink tequila again in my life."

"Saying that should be a crime," Abigail responds, slowly pulling away from her.

"A crime is what we're about to do."

They exchange smiles and head toward the women's restroom Gretel first, followed by Abigail. Abigail takes the lead, not giving Gretel a chance to reconsider their twisted plan.

Exiting the restroom together, Abigail in front and Gretel behind, they pass by the men's table, which, now up close, seems more sinister and dangerous to Abigail. She pretends to stumble and falls forward onto one of the men.

"Hey, careful, princess," he laughs, taking advantage to touch as much flesh as he can when he catches her.

Abigail feels his hand glide across her thigh and up to her buttocks, taking advantage of the excuse. Tense, she says nothing, because at that moment, Gretel also leans over to help her.

"Are you okay?" her new friend asks, pulling her up.

"Yes, sorry," she says, feigning embarrassment.

"It's been a pleasure, gorgeous. Whenever you want, you can join the party," he says crudely, grabbing his erection.

Abigail smiles uncontrollably. Not because of the lewd comment or the obscene gesture, but because, with a quick glance toward the table, she ecstatically sees that the car keys are no longer there. She has done her part, and Gretel has done hers.

"Let us treat you to a round," Abigail says, flirting.

Gretel follows her, her heart tight, toward the bar, tensing as she stands beside her.

"What the hell are you doing? We need to leave," Gretel whispers, tapping her fingers on the bar.

"Buy us some time. As long as they're drinking, they won't leave."

Abigail pays for a round and asks the bartender to take it to the guys at the table. The man looks surprised but complies, and they take advantage of his serving distraction to exit the bar.

As soon as they step outside, Gretel frantically presses the car remote, looking at the cars nearby, hoping for a honk or a light to signal their stolen car.

"Let's head to the dirt parking lot," Abigail suggests.

They navigate around the bar to the back, where there's dim light and a couple getting intimate on a car hood. Both women are nervous, adrenaline coursing through their

bodies in a disconcerting way. They haven't devised a plan if things go south, clueless about how each would react if caught.

Gretel presses the remote button again, and immediately, they hear a beep to their left. Both turn, hearts pounding, and see the hazard lights on in a car parked at the far end. They exchange euphoric glances, pleased with their luck. Those lascivious jerks couldn't have parked the car in a more discreet spot. They walk among the cars until they reach the one they seek, a black BMW with tinted rear windows.



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"Come on, let's go," Abigail urges, swinging open the driver's door.

"No, wait," Gretel pleads.

She watches Gretel rummage in her bag, reaching deep until she finds what she's looking for. Abigail leans in, intrigued, and is astonished when Gretel pulls out the most comprehensive multitool she's ever seen.

"Pol gave it to me for my birthday three years ago," she explains, pulling a tab to reveal a star screwdriver. "Can you believe it? What the hell did I need this for? According to him, it's handy to have around," she scoffs while crouching behind the car parked next to the one they intend to steal.

Abigail observes in bewilderment as, aided by the flashlight on her phone, Gretel removes the caps covering the screws on the license plate.

"I never thought I'd actually use it, but look at me," Gretel chuckles grimly. "I hope it still has his fingerprints. That way, if we get caught, we'll pin it on him too. Shine the light here, please."

Abigail, overwhelmed by her new friend's sudden criminal streak, complies, crouching beside her to illuminate while Gretel swiftly unscrews the plates. She repeats the process with the BMW, swapping the plates between the two cars.

"This way, if they report it, it'll be much harder for them to find us," she says, wiping her fingerprints off the plates with the fist of her sweater.

"Alright, we're good now."

Abigail takes the driver's seat, and Gretel sits beside her. Adjusting the seat and even the mirror, she starts the engine, rolls down the windows, and smoothly exits the parking lot, as if the car were truly theirs. As they merge onto the road, a couple of streets away, they start screaming hysterically.

The two of them feel exhilarated, more alive than ever. Abigail hits the gas, and the car responds with a screech of the tires.

"Take the exit there," Gretel requests, fanning herself with her sweater due to the thrill.

They merge onto the highway. Abigail turns on the radio, and Gretel keeps switching stations until she finds one playing a familiar Aerosmith song. Both of them belt out the lyrics at the top of their lungs, reveling in the pleasure of doing something wrong for the first time in their lives. Something forbidden, something with potential legal consequences. Despite that, they don't stop because both need this moment. They deserve it. And they'll regret it.

## Chapter 4

"How did you come up with the license plate switch?" Abigail asks, genuinely curious.

"I've been tuning into a bunch of crime and mystery podcasts," replies, still incredulous about their impromptu adventure.

After a directionless drive, belting out favorite tunes until their voices grow hoarse, they decide it's time to stop and change the scenery.

"Now it's my turn to drive," Gretel declares, and Abigail takes the first detour they come across.

This leads them onto a secondary road that resembles a scene from a horror movie, but that doesn't dampen their enjoyment. They begin to fantasize about encountering the infamous ghost girl around the next curve, weaving tales of terror until they spot the flickering lights of a gas station up ahead.

"Thank goodness," Abigail sighs in relief, "I've been dying to use the restroom."

At the gas station, two other cars are refueling. Abigail glances at the gas gauge, noticing the tank is practically full. She parks in a shadowy, secluded area, ensuring no one associates them with the car.

Abigail grabs a tissue from her bag and discreetly relieves herself on the other side of the car. Returning, she settles into the driver's seat, realizing Gretel hasn't moved.

"Are you okay?" Abigail inquires, peering into the dimness.

"Yeah, it's just... I still can't believe it," Gretel laughs.

"Regretting it?"

"Nope, and I'm starting to sober up a bit. This is the most thrilling thing I've done in years. And you? Any regrets?"

Gretel tilts her head toward Abigail, an innocent yet sensual gesture that sends a shiver down the executive's spine.

"Not at all. I feel more alive than ever. I thought you wanted to drive," Abigail says, somewhat confused.

"Did you know I'm debuting a tantalizing lingerie set I bought to seduce my idiotic husband?" Gretel asks, half lost in thought, leaving Abigail even more perplexed.

"It's a shame no one will see it," she replies when Gretel locks eyes with her.

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"I was thinking the same thing. Maybe we can solve that problem before hitting the road," Gretel suggests.

As tension and a hint of romance fill the air, the night takes an unexpected turn, their escapade evolving into something deeper and more intimate.

Abigail feels her blood simmer between her legs as Gretel leans over, slipping a hand between her knees to find the lever that adjusts the seat, pushing it back as far as it goes. Within seconds, Gretel straddles her, kissing her passionately. Abigail, accustomed to having absolute control over every aspect of her life, freezes momentarily, letting Gretel take the lead in this eager kiss that leaves them both breathless. After that fleeting moment, Abigail's hands explore Gretel's thighs, massaging them intensely before settling on her hips, pulling her closer.

"I guess you've never had sex in a stolen car," Gretel gasps, completely surrendered.

"No, at least not that I knew of," Abigail replies, a smile playing on her lips.

Gretel swiftly removes her sweater in a single motion, and Abigail thinks about how foolish her husband is to let go of a woman like her. Placing her hands at the hem of Gretel's shirt, she pulls it up, revealing a black lace bra that elegantly envelops her breasts, captivating Abigail.

She traces the curve of Gretel's breasts with a finger in a slow, electrifying path that quickens Gretel's pulse. In turn, Gretel unbuttons Abigail's shirt, something she's been yearning to do all night. As she finishes with the last button, she pulls the shirt out of her pants, her hungry gaze fixed on the executive's breasts. It's the hunger of someone

who has never been with a woman but is eager to explore every inch of her skin until satisfied.

Abigail captures Gretel's face, guiding it back to her lips, deepening a kiss that she has complete control over – the culprit behind every pore on Gretel's skin tingling and the surge of excitement spreading like spilled water throughout her being.

"Touch me," Gretel implores, feeling herself unraveling with desire.

Gretel seizes Abigail's hand, guiding it between her legs until it rests on her sex.

Abigail envelops it entirely with her palm, and Gretel feels the warmth scorching through the fabric. Unable to tear herself away from those lips that suck and savor hers, she begins unbuttoning her pants with an otherworldly need to have Abigail inside her. She can't recall ever being so heated, not with Pol or any other man she had been with before him.

"Wait a second," Abigail requests, breaking the kiss to Gretel's despair.

Abigail places a hand on Gretel's waist, using the other to find the button or lever to recline the seat. At that moment, the passing headlights reflect in the rearview mirror, catching both of their attention. With hearts racing, they turn to see a police car pulling into the gas station to refuel.

"Damn it," Gretel hisses, breathless. "What do we do?"

Abigail thinks quickly, understanding that a car parked in the darkness might attract police curiosity. She knows this from her student days when her father lent her the car, and she went to secluded spots with her girlfriend for privacy. They were often caught by patrols, requiring them to identify themselves. Now, it's not an option.

"Dress up; we need to act normal," Abigail says, starting the engine and fastening her seatbelt as Gretel awkwardly returns to her seat.

Adjusting the seat to the right position, Abigail deftly buttons her shirt, leaving Gretel wide-eyed at her skill and steady hand.

"What if we leave it here and walk away?" Gretel suggests nervously.

"And what then? Walk along the road hitchhiking? Call a cab to pick us up at a gas station in the middle of nowhere? That would draw attention," Abigail retorts.

"Good Lord, you're right. I'm just so nervous."

Gretel refrains from mentioning that after a heated moment like the one she just had, it'll take a while for her to regain composure and think clearly. She is increasingly impressed and envious of Abigail's composure. Abigail starts driving slowly to traverse the gas station on the far side of the store.

"The lights, the lights!" Gretel exclaims hysterically when she realizes Abigail hasn't turned them on.

"Damn it," Abigail exclaims, nerves taking over as she mistakenly hits the windshield wipers instead of the lights, a powerful stream of water flooding the glass while the wipers dance back and forth. "Where the hell is it?" she mutters just as they pass by the police.

Gretel succumbs to a fit of laughter, the kind where you laugh to keep from crying. Abigail finally switches on the lights, merging back onto the road, both knowing their hearts could leap out of their mouths any moment. Then, Abigail catches the contagious laughter, and they burst into hysterics. Rolling down the windows, they scream at the top of their lungs, releasing all the pent-up adrenaline.

When they roll them back up, laughter still echoes. They're aware of the wrongdoing but revel in the rebellion they've never experienced before. Gretel leans in, planting a cheek-kiss before settling back into her seat, satisfaction written all over her face.

## Chapter 5

"You know what I feel like doing now?" Gretel confesses calmly, gazing out the window.

"What?"

"Continuing what we started. We could park the car somewhere safe, get a taxi to a hotel."

"You're right," Abigail responds. "I haven't seen that complete lingerie set yet, and that's a crime."



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Both laugh, but Gretel feels herself unraveling with desire just at the thought.

"We could leave it in one of the first streets of the southern industrial estate and walk to the main road. There's a bar on the other side; we can get a taxi there," Abigail suggests. "No security cameras in those industrial estate streets, in case you're wondering. Mostly empty warehouses up for sale."

"And what if there's private security? What if they make rounds and see us ditching it?" Gretel questions.

"No private security. I've been to that estate several times for business. It's newly built, and there aren't many companies yet. Until they're more, sharing costs, they stick with their own private alarms."

"Alright then," Gretel agrees, and they take an exit to turn around and head towards the industrial estate.

"Are you sure you want to go to a hotel?" Abigail asks, glancing sideways at Gretel.

"Well, I think it'll be more comfortable than a car," Gretel hesitates, feeling stifled.

"I don't mean that. I mean, we can go to my place if you want."

"Ah..." Gretel falls silent, realizing she doesn't have a home to return to at least not one she wants to go back to.

She's surprised at how much she has managed to disconnect from her problem beside

Abigail. Her original plan was to go out, drown her sorrows with some alcohol, and then figure out what to do with her life. She's done the first part, or not even that, because ever since meeting the executive, her issues with Pol have become less important. Abigail has a numbing effect on her that seems impossible, yet it's true. With her, Gretel feels calm yet capable of conquering the world and doing all the things she avoided to please her family.

"If you prefer the hotel, that's fine," Abigail adds, a bit annoyed by Gretel's sudden silence.

By now, both women think with absolute clarity, aware that whatever they decide won't be attributed to the effects of alcohol. The buzz has long worn off perhaps due to the initial adrenaline rush or the scare of seeing the police at the gas station.

"Your place is fine. I was just pondering the fact that I haven't thought about what to do from now on. Tomorrow the sun will rise, and I'll have to decide whether I continue sharing a roof with my soon-to-be ex-husband until we finalize the divorce and figure out what to do with the apartment, or if I go with my brother until everything is resolved."

"Is the apartment jointly owned?" Abigail asks, signaling for a turn.

"Yes."

"Well, then let him go. After all, he's the one who ended the relationship, right?"

Gretel looks at her, furrowing her brow, nodding mechanically. Abigail is right; he's the culprit and the one who should leave.

"Yes," she concludes, falling into thought.

"I get that you're overwhelmed. I've witnessed that process twice with one of my brothers, and it's tough. You can stay at my place for a few days until you figure things out. I guess right now, you don't really feel like seeing him."

"Wouldn't you mind having me there? We just met," Gretel asks, surprised by the invitation.

"We committed a crime together and are heading to my place because we're dying to keep going at it. I can't think of anything more intimate than that."

"You're right," Gretel agrees, not quite accustomed to Abigail's straightforward logic.

"We're adults, and I believe we're smart enough to coexist civilly for a few days. My house is big, and I work twelve-hour days; we'll barely see each other."

Gretel doesn't know exactly why she accepts the offer, but she does. She'd rather spend a few days at the home of a woman who has become her confidante, partner in crime, and lover in a matter of hours than remain under the same roof as Pol or land at her brother's place, subjected to the third degree from him, his wife, and their parents when they find out she's left home. They'll do it without considering how little she wants to talk about something she hasn't fully processed yet.

"Thanks. I promise you won't even notice I'm there. I just need a few days to clear my head. Tomorrow, I'll stop by my place to grab some clothes, and on Monday, I'll take a few days off work. I need to disconnect from everything to think."

"I understand. Do what you need to; it'll be like living alone, you'll see."

Gretel senses a hint of sadness in Abigail's voice and empathizes, putting herself in her shoes and imagining how she'd feel if, after working twelve-hour days without anyone in her family appreciating her efforts, she arrived at an empty, vast house

where no one was waiting for her.

Unaware, they arrive at the industrial estate Abigail mentioned. Despite the seriousness of their conversation, neither has changed their minds about the plan for a night of unrestrained passion.

Abigail parks on a street just behind some trash containers. She turns to Gretel, who looks at her with a fervor that makes her whole body tingle. Abigail is in a hurry to get to the bar, call a taxi, and strip the curious woman of her clothes.

"Come on, let's go."

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As they unfasten their seatbelts, a thud echoes like a drumbeat, freezing them in place.

"What was that?" Abigail wonders aloud.

"No idea, but it sounded like it came from inside the car," Gretel responds, her face turning pale.

"That's impossible. Maybe a cat crawled under the car seeking warmth. They always hang around the trash containers," Abigail reasons, fond of using logic.

"Well, it must be a very large cat, almost like a tiger."

Gretel's response makes them both laugh, but it's short-lived. They hear the noise again, and this time, they are sure it comes from the rear of the car.

"Damn."

Abigail opens the door, and without second thoughts, she steps out of the car, followed by Gretel. They stand at the back, contemplating the trunk.

"Do you think it came from there?" Gretel asks, her gaze fixed.

"There's only one way to find out."

As soon as Abigail presses the button to open the tailgate, they see the lights of a car approaching in their direction. They have no time to react. The door is already going

up, and at the same time, both women stifle a scream at the sight of a man tied up in a fetal position, moving clumsily. Simultaneously, they notice the approaching car is a patrol from the industrial estate security.

"You said there weren't any, didn't you?" Gretel shouts as, on pure instinct, they lower the trunk door, hitting the man's head to keep him from revealing them.

"The last time I came, there weren't any," Abigail replies, for the first time in her life unsure of what to do.

The security patrol stops next to them, and the driver rolls down the window.

"Lost?" he asks, looking at them in the dim light.

Abigail is grateful for the poor illumination in that particular area.

"No," she responds confidently, flashing one of her dazzling smiles. "I heard a noise, thought we had a flat tire, stopped to check, but it was just a stone stuck in the wheel. We're leaving now."

"Be careful," the man responds, convinced by Abigail's answer. "Industrial estates aren't safe at night."

"Of course, thanks. Have a good patrol."

They watch the patrol drive away, and only then do Abigail and Gretel realize they are holding their breaths.

The two women climb into the car and exchange looks, trying to avoid a heart attack.

"We can't take the car," Gretel says, terrified.

"He saw us, damn it. We can't leave it here."

"Oh my God, what if we killed him?" Gretel sobs.

Abigail doesn't respond; she just prays that the blow they delivered only stunned him. She starts the car, leaving the industrial estate while deciding amid hysterical shouts what they should do.

## Chapter 6

"This is Pol's fault," Gretel opines between hysterical sighs that almost drown her.

In the midst of this nervous moment, Abigail looks at her and bursts into laughter to avoid crying.

"It's true," Gretel insists, "if that idiot hadn't dumped me, I wouldn't have gone to the bar, we wouldn't have met, and certainly, we wouldn't have stolen a car with a guy in the trunk."

"You also wouldn't have been on the brink of orgasm," Abigail retorts, offended.

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Gretel looks at her in silence until she manages to calm down a bit.

"Sorry," instinct makes her place her hand on Abigail's on the gear lever, "I don't regret meeting you, but all of this is overwhelming. What are we going to do? We can't go around with a stolen car and that..."

Gretel points backward, unable to say the words.

"You're right; we have to get rid of him and the car."

"Do you want us to kill him?" Gretel exclaims, raising her voice.

"Don't shout, damn it," Abigail reproaches, turning up the radio to blend their conversation with the announcer's. "I don't want to kill him. What do you take me for?" Abigail gets offended again, maintaining her composure despite the situation, surprising Gretel even more.

"Okay, I'm sorry," she apologizes again. "Do you have any ideas?"

"We have to do things right, Gretel," Abigail gives her a quick glance and then focuses on the road again. "We can't let them catch us with him or the car. We'll be accused of theft, and maybe rightfully so, but not of the latter."

Gretel freezes, contemplating the repercussions if they get caught. She envisions the bewildered expressions on Pol's and her family's faces, and another wave of nervous laughter engulfs her. Abigail gazes at her, unable to suppress her own laughter.



"I need to calm down, damn it," Gretel mutters to herself, mimicking deep breaths as seen in movies.

"You're doing it backward," Abigail corrects her, "inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth."

"Ah..." Gretel responds, and they both burst into laughter again until they tire.

"Alright, we need to decide what to do," Abigail sighs.

"Okay, okay," Gretel waves her hands as if dispelling evil spirits. "Let's focus. Whatever it is, we need to take advantage of the darkness, right?"

"True," Abigail replies with a proud smile.

"We could leave him in some open area not far from a gas station or a town," Gretel suggests, calmer than she's been all night.

"I agree, leave him there, and then we should buy gasoline and torch the car."

"Poor owner," Gretel murmurs, "I hope he has insurance."

"Yeah, me too..." Abigail responds, becoming absorbed in thought.

"What's wrong?" Gretel asks.

"We haven't asked the most important question," Abigail says, as if suddenly struck by clarity.

"And what's that?"

"What is that man doing there? It's clear he's been kidnapped, a victim, and here we are, driving around with him in the damn trunk of a car. He must have a family, people worried about him. Those bastards were probably going to ask for a ransom."

Gretel feels her heart pounding like a jackhammer. Abigail is right.

"We need to call the police," she admits in a whisper.

Abigail takes the first exit and stops the car at the entrance of a small town that, at two in the morning, remains eerily quiet.

"What we need to do is check if he's okay and ask him what happened. We can't show up at the police station with him in the trunk; they'll handcuff us before asking what happened," Abigail says, feeling her head about to explode from overthinking.

"Okay."

Both women appear resolute, though deep down, fear lingers, casting doubt on their ability to make the right decision. They exit the car and cautiously open the rear hatch. Relief washes over them as they realize the man appears relatively unharmed, just a bit disoriented. Leaving the trunk ajar, they shield their faces with jackets.

"Hey, are you okay?" Abigail inquires.

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The man emits a muffled groan, followed by what seems like a complaint. Slowly turning, he faces them, revealing his mouth covered with tape.

"We need to remove it," Abigail asserts.

"Do you want us to touch him?" Gretel, wide-eyed, asks.

"I can't think of any other way," Abigail responds sarcastically.

Gradually, the man regains clarity. In the dimly lit area, his features remain elusive. The gagged man starts to groan louder, struggling to free himself. Both women watch, frozen; there's something unsettling about him, an instinctual warning of danger, particularly sensed by Abigail.

"Carol, grab your phone and shine the flashlight," Abigail instructs Gretel, who looks puzzled until realizing Abigail deliberately used a different name.

"On it," Gretel says, rushing to her seat, retrieving her phone, and returning with the flashlight ablaze.

She focuses on the man, who blinks several times, trying to adjust to the blinding light. Both women observe, and if he gave them an uneasy feeling before, now they are certain they shouldn't release him. The man appears young, just over thirty, with black hair mirroring the darkness in his emotionless, angry gaze. Gretel senses the presence of a psychopath, reminiscent of the descriptions in the true crime podcasts she often listens to, sending a shiver down her spine.

Except for a head wound, likely inflicted by the men at the bar, now dried and crusted with blood, he seems to harbor nothing but unbridled fury.

"If you stay still, I'll remove the tape," Abigail proposes, growing increasingly nervous.

"Maybe we should call the police," Gretel insists at her side.

Hearing that word, the man emits hysterical sounds muffled under the tape. It's the first time he looks at them with pleading eyes and suddenly becomes still, in a clear state of submission. Abigail examines the way he's tied; there seems to be little danger of him breaking free. His hands are bound behind his back, with a rope connecting the binding to his tightly tied feet.

She leans over him as a couple of cars pass by without stopping. Times have changed; now, no one in their right mind halts to help a stranded vehicle, the risk of falling into a trap and getting beaten or robbed is too high.

Abigail grabs the duct tape on his mouth and gives it a forceful yank before stepping back as if afraid he might bite her.

"No police," the man declares with absolute coldness.

Both women stand frozen. They expected pleas and cries from someone in their predicament. It's logical to seek help, but the man doesn't, and his situation doesn't seem to bother him much.

"I'll pay you; I have a lot of money. Just give me an address, and tomorrow you'll have enough money to fix your lives," he assures with an icy tone.

"Don't you want to report those who did this to you?" Gretel asks, her brain

struggling to process what she's hearing.

The man crafts the most macabre half-smile they've ever seen, sending shivers down their spines. Their sense of danger intensifies rapidly, and Abigail thinks perhaps the smartest move is to leave him there and run. However, suddenly, a disconcerting sense of responsibility grips her – the same responsibility that drives her to work tirelessly, single-handedly sustaining a business employing over four hundred workers who would be left jobless if she were to abandon it like her brothers did.

"Who are you?" Abigail asks.

"Who am I?"

The man releases a histrionic laugh that freezes their blood in their veins.

"I am the man who will butcher you and your entire family if you don't release me right now," he shouts.

Both women jump in fright, moving away from the trunk.

"Come on, don't be stupid and accept what I'm offering. I have no idea where the hell you came from or what you're doing in this, but I don't think you're with them. You don't fit the profile, damn it," he chuckles, shaking his head, "you look like two scared little lambs. This is the last time I say it, let me go, let me take the car, and tomorrow you'll be disgustingly rich."

"I don't think so," Abigail decides, who, since removing the tape from his mouth, can't shake the feeling that his face is familiar, but she can't place him.

"You filthy, disgusting bitch!" he roars with anger, writhing like a snake, "If you hand me over, I'll say you kidnapped me, damn whores, and I assure you witnesses

will appear out of nowhere. I'll rot in jail, but not alone," he threatens furiously.

"I think we should do what he says," Gretel says, pretending to be even more frightened.

The man stops again, giving his full attention to her, and Abigail nods.

"You're right, I already have enough problems to worry about another that doesn't concern me," Abigail plays along.

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"Finally, you say something intelligent," he smirks insincerely.

"Get our things from the car, Carla," Abigail tells Gretel, whose eyes widen when Abigail gets her name wrong.

The executive doesn't seem to care, and Gretel opens the door, pretending to grab something.

"Alright, I'll leave a knife in your hand, and you figure out how to free yourself. I hope you don't mind," Abigail tells him.

"A cautious woman, very clever," he nods.

Abigail approaches him, and instead of leaving something in his hand, she quickly places the tape over his mouth, not enough for him to violently shake off the deceit and hit her in the face with his head. Abigail staggers backward, completely stunned, and Gretel rushes to close the trunk. The man is half-sitting, resisting, but driven by fear and anger for what he did to Abigail, she hits him with the hatch repeatedly until he lies down, and she finally closes the trunk.

"Are you okay?" Gretel asks, crouching beside Abigail, who has finally lost her balance and ended up sitting.

"I think so," she responds, a bit dazed.

Gretel uses the flashlight on her phone to focus on her. That jerk has smashed her nose and reddened her cheekbone. They hear the muffled attempts to scream from the

guy in the trunk, and the car rocks from side to side as if someone is having a romp inside.

"We need to go to the police, but if he follows through with his threat..." Gretel says, helping her up, "we won't have a way to prove he's lying. We've stolen a car."

She guides her to the passenger seat and takes a tissue from her purse to stem the bleeding.

"We're in deep trouble," Abigail whispers, dropping her head back.

## Chapter 7

Gretel sits behind the wheel, overwhelmed by the situation and the incessant movements and complaints from the guy. Abigail pinches her nose with a paper ball and dries the tears caused by the blow. Then she turns to Gretel with determination.

"We have to find a way to turn the situation in our favor. Clearly, we can't go to the police. If he follows through with his threat, we're screwed, and I refuse to end up in jail for something I didn't do."

"Me neither," Gretel affirms, trying to sound as confident as Abigail.

"I have a beach house with a lot of land, the nearest neighbors are fifty meters away. We can go there, and once safe, we can calmly decide what to do."

"Agreed," Gretel concedes, starting the engine, grateful that Abigail is so decisive. If it were up to her alone, she's sure she'd be crying her heart out in front of a police station.

For a seemingly endless thirty minutes, Abigail guides Gretel to her house, both



hoping there are no setbacks. They enter a residential area and practically drive through the entire place until they reach a massive wall with a sliding gate that starts moving the moment Abigail presses the remote button. As they cross it and it closes behind them, they feel safe for the first time since discovering they had an intruder on board.

Abigail swings open the garage door, and they slip inside.

"Now what?" Gretel asks. "We can't leave him there indefinitely; he'll need to use the bathroom and stuff."

The guy had stopped moving during the drive, but now he resumes complaining and banging, rocking the car. They exit and enter the house. Abigail switches on the lights and heads straight to her room, followed by Gretel, who observes everything with amazement, unsure of Abigail's intentions.

The executive opens a door, leading them into a walk-in closet that widens Gretel's eyes despite the sleepiness creeping in. There isn't much clothing, indicating it's Abigail's second residence. Still, Gretel is certain there's more here than in her sad two-door closet shared with Pol.

Abigail grabs a couple of hoodies, and Gretel notices almost all the clothes are comfy, suitable for lounging at home or exercising. She figures it's Abigail's sanctuary where she disconnects from the stressful life of an overworked businesswoman.

She hands Gretel a neck gaiter that they pull up to cover their noses. Abigail winces in pain, and a couple of tears escape.

"Damn it," she curses, irritated, scrunching her nose.

They put on the hoodies, tightening the hood strings to conceal their hair. There was little light before, but now, in the dimness, it's better for both of them.

"There's a storage room in the garage; we'll lock him in there," Abigail decides.

They spend the next few minutes getting everything ready. They drag a small mattress from the guest room, noticing it's brand new, suggesting Abigail's social life is almost as sparse as Gretel's. They bring a large water bottle, a pack of cookies, some juice, and leave an empty bottle for him to pee. Abigail steps outside, and Gretel follows like a loyal puppy; it's clear the executive knows what she's doing.

She removes the bike from a wall-mounted rack while the guy continues moaning in the car. Abigail grabs a climbing rope from a closet and, standing on a small ladder, threads one end through the vent connecting the storage room to the garage. She reenters and calculates leaving the rope hanging about half a meter above the ground. She heads towards the bike rack, skillfully tying a knot Gretel is sure is impossible to untie.

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"Wow!" Gretel exclaims, genuinely impressed. She catches Abigail's smiling eyes, sending a palpitation through her heart, abruptly waking her up.

"With this, we'll keep him still in the back of the storage room, so we can enter without the risk of him attacking us."

Once everything is ready, they exchange glances, release a deep sigh, and, armed with an iron bar, Abigail opens the trunk gate.

The man stays still, cheeks red and puffed with air, trying to speak.

"We're getting you out. Stay still, or I swear I'll crack your head open with this," Abigail threatens.

He nods, so numb he'd do anything to breathe fresh air. Besides, he can assess his situation and evaluate the threat level posed by two women who, by their actions, he's sure aren't linked to any criminal gang.

Gretel grabs his legs and pulls them out. The rope tying his hands to his feet behind his back is a mobility challenge, but they don't trust him enough to untie it. So, with effort, they pull him out and, once on the ground, drag him to the back of the storage room.

Abigail studies the guy's restraints. With his hands tied behind, he won't be able to eat or attend to his needs. To ensure he won't harm them when released, she ties the other end around his neck like a noose. Gretel, at the garage's exit, pulls with force, causing him a slight choke.

"If you try anything, you know what will happen," Abigail warns.

Struggling to breathe, his face red from the effort to let some air in through his nose, he fears for his life for the first time. An error from those two fools, and he'd die in the most absurd way, he thinks. So, he remains still as Abigail unties the rope connecting his hands and feet, securing them in front with a much tighter knot than before. Finally, she threatens him with the iron bar while Gretel stops choking him and joins her. The man falls to the floor amidst muffled coughs behind the tape covering his mouth. Abigail seizes the opportunity of his weakened state, ties the rope to the one binding his hands, leaving him confined in the corner. When they decide he's fully under control, they remove the tape from his mouth.

"Maybe you think we're stupid, but here no one can hear you, so don't shout, and we'll let you breathe through your mouth. You can drink and eat, but if I hear a single scream, I'll shut it again, got it?" Abigail's voice cuts through the air, firm and unyielding.

"You don't know who you're messing with, you damn bitches," he retorts, half-hoarse from sobs and groans. "By now, my father will know I've been kidnapped, and he'll have everyone looking for me. Questions will be asked here and there," he adds with a sinister chuckle, "and I assure you, it won't take long for them to find out I'm in the company of two bitches who have no damn clue what they're doing."

"Who's your father?" Gretel asks, horror evident in her voice.

"Teodoro Blanco," he says slowly, relishing the paleness that takes over the little skin visible on the two women. "That's right," he laughs amused, "you've kidnapped the son of the most wanted drug trafficker in Spain. I don't know what my father will think when he finds out what you've done," he says sarcastically. Abigail and Gretel exit the storage room, lock the door, and exchange a glance, trying to contain the tremors in their bodies.

## Chapter 8

"Let's go," Abigail tells Gretel before turning off the garage light and closing the door. Leading her to the kitchen, they shed everything covering their faces. After preparing glasses of warm milk to help them relax, they sit across from each other at the island and sip it in small sips.

"Are you into rock climbing?" Gretel asks, intrigued.

"I was, it's been a long time since I've practiced, but I still remember how to tie knots surprisingly well."

The distraction ends there. After Abigail's last words, both women fall into thoughtful silence, grappling with their obvious and grave problem.

"We need to get rid of the car," Gretel suddenly declares, "our prints are all over it."

"I agree. Tomorrow morning, I'll take it to an empty lot and set it on fire."

"Wouldn't it be better to sink it in a lake like in the movies? Fire will attract too much attention."

"There are no lakes around here, Gretel, and we're not sinking it on the beach. Plus, by the time the firefighters arrive, there won't be a trace of our prints, don't worry."

"You're right. And what do we do with him?"

The tension thickens as they delve into the intricate web of decisions that could seal their fate.

Gretel nods towards the garage.

"I think the first step is confirming if he's really the son of who he claims to be, but I suggest we leave all that for tomorrow. We're exhausted, and at least I can't think clearly right now. We should get a few hours of sleep. With a clear mind, I'm sure we'll find the best way to handle this without causing too much harm," she says, touching her nose with caution to remove the bloodied paper ball.

"Does it hurt a lot?"

Gretel gives her a wry look. Abigail's nose is a bit swollen, and two bruised threads run up the sides, reaching beneath her eyes. Yet, the woman before her remains infuriatingly attractive.

"Every time I breathe," Abigail laments.

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"You should ice it. That'll help reduce the swelling and ease the pain."

"I need to sleep. If I don't close my eyes for a few hours, I don't think I can bear this."

It's past three in the morning when, after a quick shower and Gretel borrowing clean clothes from the host, the two lie down on Abigail's bed and shut their eyes. Far from their initial intentions.

They don't take long to fall asleep, but it's not a deep, pleasant slumber. Instead, it's tinged with the unease that an extremely dangerous person remains confined in the house's storage room.

Abigail is the first to wake up. A sharp pang of pain courses through her face. Her heart races as the image of the bound man in her house flashes in her mind. Glancing at the bedside clock, she's surprised to find it's almost eight in the morning. When she laid down, she was certain she'd sleep for just a couple of hours and then wake up.

Turning on the bedside lamp, Abigail looks at Gretel, who still sleeps but bears a tense expression, unable to enjoy her rest fully. Abigail takes a few seconds to ponder how different things would be without the trunk problem. She and Gretel would be in the same bed, without clothes, sporting the blissful expression of those who've enjoyed a night of passionate intimacy. She lets out a sigh of regret and gently wakes Gretel by rocking her arm.

"What's going on?"

Startled, Gretel jerks up, startling Abigail in return.

"Nothing, sorry for waking you," Abigail apologizes, studying her.

Gretel's hair is a lion's mane, and she wears a sleepy scowl. Abigail smiles, realizing she wouldn't mind waking up to this image every morning.

"What time is it?" Gretel asks, trying to focus.

"Almost eight. We should get up and start figuring out how to handle this."

"Right, yes," Gretel hesitates. "How are you feeling?"

Gretel looks at her; Abigail's eye sockets are darker, a deep shade of almost black. The sides of her nose are bruised, but to her surprise, there's no further swelling.

"It only hurts if I touch it now."

"I'm sorry I did that to you," Gretel says.

At that moment, their eyes lock, suppressing the desire growing inside them, confirming that last night's connection wasn't just a result of alcohol clouding their judgment. The attraction is real, present, and growing with every passing second they spend together.

Without saying more, they sigh and each gets out of bed. Gretel checks her phone to find thirteen missed calls from Pol, all from this morning, along with a pleading message asking if she's okay. Gretel clicks her tongue and locks the phone again, deciding that leaving him on "seen" is enough to let him know she's alive. She doesn't feel like talking to him.

They dress without fear of exposing their nudity to each other. A trust and complicity have developed rapidly between them, making them comfortable being together, as if



they've known each other for decades, when it's only been a few hours.

In the kitchen, Gretel prepares breakfast while Abigail opens her laptop and searches for Teodoro Blanco's name. The overwhelming number of results on the infamous drug trafficker leaves her stunned. She heads straight to the images, not needing to browse much to find the man they have captive in the storage room. In several photos, he poses with his father, mother, and two sisters, presenting a picture-perfect family. Abigail clicks on a link and reads an article detailing Teodoro, operating under the guise of one of the many companies he had created to launder money before the truth emerged. The article mentions how he financed a rehabilitation center for addicts.

"Damn hypocrite," Abigail snorts.

"Who? Did you find him?" Gretel asks, pouring two cups of coffee with milk.

"Yeah, here he is. Mikel Blanco," she points at the screen, the man's name appearing after hovering the cursor over his head.

"Shit," Gretel mutters, disheartened.

Abigail shuts the laptop, turns on the television to the 24-hour news channel to check for updates. The news blocks repeat every half hour unless there's breaking news. The headlines focus on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, pandemic statistics, and a patricide committed by a fifteen-year-old in Elche. Both shudder at the latter, thinking the next segment will be the weather report. However, they freeze as a shocking image unfolds on the screen. Neither Mikel nor his father dominates the headlines. Instead, it's a man found stabbed in a vacant lot early this morning, along with his two brutally attacked companions, categorized as a settling of scores. The second man is in critical condition, while the third is expected to recover. The deceased is Alejandro Piquela, alias Piqui, a bounty hunter who has made a living locating and handing over

criminals to the police. The two turn pale at the image displayed, certain he's one of the men at that table from whom they stole the car keys.

The news has piqued interest for various reasons. Firstly, both the police and the government have denied paying individuals like him for such jobs, and now everyone wants to know if it's one of those things that exist but will never be admitted. Secondly, after interrogating the less severely injured survivor, he claimed they had kidnapped Mikel Blanco, the son of one of Spain's most dangerous drug traffickers operating on the Costa del Sol, Teodoro Blanco. According to unofficial sources, they stumbled upon Mikel by chance and acted on impulse. Knowing he had little value to the police, they made the worst possible decision and decided to ransom him to his father, who would undoubtedly be willing to pay a much more substantial amount.

"Oh my god" Abigail exclaims, eyes wide.

The headline concludes as the journalist on the screen explains that the police are skeptical of this version because the man hasn't been able to reveal Mikel Blanco's location. According to him, they had him bound and semi-drugged in the trunk of his car, and someone stole it.

"We need to get rid of that car right now," Gretel impatiently stands up. "Even if we changed the license plate, the police will soon figure out the model, and the owner of the other car won't take long to realize that the one driving it isn't him. When he reports it, they'll connect the dots and have an easier time."

Abigail listens but doesn't respond. She reopens the laptop and searches for the model of the BMW parked in her garage.

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"What are you doing?" Gretel asks, intrigued, sitting next to her.

"I want to make sure it doesn't have a built-in GPS tracker because if it does, we're screwed."

Gretel pales but calms down when they confirm that this model is quite old and doesn't have one.

"What if the owner installed their own? You know, those ones they sell on Amazon..." Gretel wonders aloud.

"I doubt it. I don't think someone involved in this kind of thing would bother. In any case, it wouldn't be too bad because then all the data would be sent directly to their mobile account, and it will take the police a while to get the company to provide the information."

"True, things don't move as fast as they make us believe in movies or books," Gretel confirms, secretly grateful for being a fan of those true crime podcasts that taught her so much.

"Alright, you stay with him, and I'll get rid of the car."

"No way," Gretel categorically refuses. "We're both in this together, and we won't separate."

Abigail looks at her and agrees, feeling relieved not to go alone. Despite her icy exterior, she's just as terrified as Gretel. They cover their faces and head straight to

the garage, where Abigail pounds on the storage room door.

"Hey, are you okay?" she asks, heart racing.

"You're gonna regret what you're doing," Mikel spits from inside.

"Good," Abigail whispers to Gretel, "stay intact."

They open the door and find him curled up on the mattress. A stench of urine slaps them, making their noses crinkle, and nausea creeps in.

"Left you a bottle to piss in," Abigail reproaches, noting the damp corner opposite the mattress.

"Thought it best to leave as much DNA trace as possible around here."

Mikel laughs, then spits against the wall, earning disgusted looks from the women.

"Do as you please; you're the one living with this putrid smell," Gretel says, attempting to appear unfazed.

"Here's your last chance. Release me far from here, and my father will pay you enough to leave the country and start fresh somewhere else," Mikel suggests.

Gretel is about to respond, but Abigail signals her to hold off, speaking for both of them.

"Let us ponder it for a few hours. Understand that we've got a real mess on our hands, and we're figuring out the best way to deal with it."

Mikel scans them up and down, nodding. After all, he can't escape, and all he can do

is wait.

"Alright, but as a goodwill gesture, could you fetch me a coffee? Smell it from here," he says, sniffing as if there's a line of coke in front of him.

"Fine," Gretel concedes.

They close the door and return to the kitchen.

"Got any sleeping pills?" Gretel asks Abigail, who stares at her in astonishment before a half-smile creeps onto her face, causing Gretel's heart to flutter.

"Think there's Diazepam, might be expired."

"Doesn't matter, probably works better that way," Gretel says with a sly grin. "I think it's best we keep him calm when we're not around."

"Agreed. Make the coffee light with lots of milk."

After concocting the magic potion, they return to the storage room, leaving the steaming plastic cup at the foot of the bed before locking it again. They grab some cash, hop in the car, ready to return without him.

Chapter 9

*Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:37 am*

"Do you have any place in mind? Know of any vacant lots around here?" Gretel asks behind the wheel.

"Yeah, on the outskirts of a nearby village, there's a path leading to a dilapidated mansion. The entire surrounding land is devoid of vegetation. Once we're done, getting back to the road below, where the forest begins, won't be difficult. From there, we can walk to the village and catch a direct bus to Malaga, retrieve my car parked in my office's lot, and head back," Abigail explains.

Gretel looks at her wide-eyed, finding comfort in Abigail's calm demeanor. Abigail exudes a sense of resolution, a woman with resources who seems to have a plan for everything.

"Do you think that man got stabbed because of us?" Gretel asks, swallowing hard.

Abigail furrows her brow, contemplating it since they heard the news. Her conclusion remains the same, despite her attempts to feel some guilt.

"No, not at all. That man was killed because of his greed. You heard him; he had the chance to do his job without any issues. Yet, he and his friends decided they could get more by blackmailing Teodoro. He's a damn drug lord who would kill if someone dared to steal half a kilo of coke. What did they expect him to do when he found out they had his son?"

"I can't believe they intended to make the exchange there, in that parking lot," Gretel shakes her head.

"Maybe it wasn't there, and they were found before. It's impossible to know. Don't dwell on something that will only confuse us more. Now we need to focus on our real problem. You've seen what they did to those people, Gretel. If that man finds out we have his son, he'll kill us too."

"What if we release him far from here? He hasn't seen our faces..."

"Do you really think he won't find us? That he doesn't have resources? Thanks to the news, he already knows where it all happened. He just needs to send someone to ask questions at the bar, and sooner or later, they'll find us, at least me remember I paid with a card."

"You're right," Gretel admits as they pull into the gas station.

Abigail slides on her sunglasses and a cap, freeing her ponytail. Stepping out, she heads into the shop to purchase a five-liter gasoline canister. Meanwhile, Gretel, also wearing a cap and avoiding the security camera's gaze, makes a cash payment to activate the pump. They fill the canister to the brim and leave, blending seamlessly into the bustling gas station activity. No one pays attention to these attractive women carrying a canister of gas; it's just another ordinary sight.

Back in the car, they tune the radio to a news station, hoping for any updates that might implicate them. However, when the announcer finally touches on the topic, there's no new information.

"Sooner or later, they'll find us; the police aren't fools. That guy might have told them two women stole their car keys," Gretel speculates. "They could have a lead."

"Or maybe he said nothing because they have no clue how their keys disappeared. They were high as kites; they could have lost them anywhere. But yes, you're right. Someone will stumble upon our trail, and with my credit card, they won't take long to

track us down. Whatever we decide, we need to do it today," Abigail adds, pointing out the turnoff leading to the abandoned mansion.

They drive along a path parallel to the road for two or three minutes. To their right, a forest separates them from the road, and to their left, a vast stretch of vegetation-free land. They reach the ruins Abigail mentioned and decide to park the car on the left side of the house, far enough to shield it from potential flames if a strong gust of wind decides to play tricks. Abigail glances at the sky; it's a clear day, not a single cloud posing a threat to their plan.

"Got everything?" Gretel asks as they both step out of the car.

"Yes," Abigail replies, peering into her sports bag.

She ensures she has her house keys, car keys, and the lighter she grabbed from the kitchen.

"Will there be anyone inside, right?" Gretel questions, pointing at the ruins.

"No one walks all the way here; it's in the middle of nowhere."

However, Gretel plants doubt, choosing to approach the entrance and peer inside.

"Hello?" she calls out loudly.

No response. The remnants of the old mansion offer little hiding space; only some exterior walls remain, the roof having collapsed long ago.

"See, empty," Abigail confirms.

"How did you know about this place?"



"It's a quiet spot for privacy when you're young and the only thing you have is a car."

Gretel needs no further explanation to grasp the nature of Abigail's visits to the area.

"Now I suppose there are better places than this, but back in my day, this was all we had."

Afterward, they open all the car doors, and Abigail spreads gasoline everywhere, especially on the seats they occupied and in the trunk. When the canister is empty, she tosses it into the trunk and uses some papers from the glove compartment, rolling them into makeshift torches, lighting them at the furthest end from their hands.

"Can I do it?" Gretel asks with a certain level of excitement.

"Sure," Abigail laughs, "but be careful; we don't want you getting burned."

Gretel approaches the car from behind, and when the papers are fully ablaze, she tosses them into the trunk and runs. They hear a burst, and within seconds, flames expand, eagerly consuming the vehicle. They feel the heat on their cheeks, standing mesmerized as the fire engulfs the car.

"We need to go," Abigail announces finally, "smoke will soon be visible from the road or the town, and they'll call the firefighters."

The two run to the wooded area, where they only have to advance about sixty meters in a straight line before reaching the road. There's a greenway on the side, so as soon as they arrive, they start walking as if they were two friends doing some exercise. In just over half an hour, they reach a village where, after waiting twenty minutes at the bus stop, they board and head back to Malaga.

They arrive in just over an hour and walk quickly towards Abigail's workplace. In doing so, they pass very close to Gretel's apartment, feeling a pang of anxiety in her chest.

"I used to live around here, or I lived," one of the streets turning right points out to Abigail.

"With all this mess, you haven't had time to think. If we get out of this, my offer stands, Gretel. You can stay with me for as long as you need."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"If we really get through this, I think I'll definitely open a churro stand," Gretel reflects aloud.

Abigail looks at her, unable to hide an expression of surprise. However, she says nothing because she spots a cellphone store run by Pakistanis and gets an idea.

"How much cash do you have?" Abigail asks Gretel.

"Ten euros," she responds somewhat embarrassed. "I guess you don't usually carry less than three hundred in your wallet."

"You're mistaken there," Abigail smiles. "I'm the card-swiping type, only keeping a twenty-bill just in case. Come, let's go to that ATM."

When they arrive, Abigail searches her sports bag for the card and withdraws four hundred euros. Gretel looks at her wide-eyed but says nothing, just follows her to the cellphone store.

"I need a phone that belongs to no one," Abigail says to the clerk when there are no other customers in the store.

"I don't know what you mean," he hesitates.

"I believe you do."

Abigail leaves a fifty-euro bill on the counter, and the young man watches them sternly.

"It'll cost you a hundred fifty with ten euros in calls," he says, looking her in the eyes for the first time.

"That's much better; give me two." After paying, they leave the store.

"Why did you buy unregistered phones?" Gretel innocently asks.

"I don't know yet, but if we have to make any calls, it's better not to leave a trace."

They reach Abigail's building, and the doorman greets her enthusiastically.

"Good morning, Mrs. Luque."

"Hello, Martin. I won't stay today, just here to pick up the car," she replies, avoiding his gaze while keeping her sunglasses on.

"Of course, have a good day."

Gretel can see the raised-eyebrow expression on the man's face when Abigail said she wasn't staying.

"Do you work on Saturdays too?"

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"Most of the time, yes. What do you do?" Abigail presses the button for the elevator, taking them to the underground floor.

"I'm an accountant for a tax office."

When the elevator reaches the bottom, the doors open, but Abigail doesn't allow her to exit. She blocks her in a corner, placing her hands on the wall on each side of her.

"Are you an accountant, wanting to open a churro stand?" Abigail asks with absolute intrigue.

Gretel feels her legs turn to butter having her so close. Daringly, she takes off Abigail's sunglasses because she needs to see her eyes and the sparkle they emit when Abigail smiles.

"I'm fed up with numbers, calls, and dealing with a hypocritical boss who's been promising a raise for five years. I love churros; they're simple and delicious, everyone likes them," Gretel argues, shrugging to keep her heart from escaping her chest.

"I prefer the future churro maker," Abigail responds, getting a bit closer, "but I can make room for those churros too."

Nothing delights Gretel more than the idea of having her own churro stand and sharing churros with chocolate with the executive. However, she doesn't say it because she can't contain herself and kisses her as if she needs her to breathe. Abigail responds despite the pricks of pain in her nose, and they devour each other with devotion until the lack of air forces them to stop. Abigail rests her forehead against

Gretel's, swallowing saliva as she catches her breath.

"We'll get through this, I promise. And you'll have your churro stand, and I'll come to see you every morning," she whispers with sincerity and a genuine desire for it to come true.

Gretel nods, smiling explosively. She feels like crying at that moment too many emotions in a very short time. She should be sad about Pol, and yet, she only feels excitement at the idea of seeing Abigail every day. She worries that it's all a smokescreen she created to hide the pain she should feel for her marriage falling apart. But then she thinks about the uncontrolled desire she feels when she's with her, how she starts to lose her breath when Abigail looks at her, or the shivers that run through her body when she's touched. And then Gretel is certain that what she's starting to feel for Abigail is real the smokescreen was her marriage.

"Come on, we have to go back. We'll figure out the best solution along the way," Abigail says, pulling her.

The two step out of the elevator with their hearts still racing. Abigail presses the button on the car remote, and the lights of a silver Mercedes flicker. Gretel settles in beside her, feeling like the seat was custom-made, smiling without knowing why.

"If we end up in jail, I hope they at least lock us up together," Abigail says before starting the car.

## Chapter 10

Recently promoted Sergeant Cruz Ortega of OCON Sur (Anti-Drug Trafficking Coordination Agency) in the Civil Guard is nervous. The first case she leads not only results in a man dead after a brutal assault, one likely not to survive, and another who will leave the hospital with a permanent limp, but to add more spice to the situation,

this last one claims that Mikel Blanco, the son of Teodoro Blanco, the man monopolizing most of the unit's resources in a desperate attempt to catch him, had been kidnapped.

"We're closing in on him, and soon we'll make a massive arrest that will bring them all down, so don't mess it up," her lieutenant told her minutes ago.

"Don't mess it up?"

"Find that guy, Cruz. Teodoro is the only one we haven't located, and that's why the operation is on hold. We need them all to fall. You know how this works."

"I highly doubt Mikel will tell us where his father is, Lieutenant," she dared to say.

"You're still very green, Cruz," he said with a somewhat fraternal tone that annoyed her, "but you're smart and good at what you do. Mikel Blanco is useless, doesn't know how to do anything on his own, and lives under his father's wing. Where do you think he'll go if he manages to escape?"

Cruz held her breath and nodded in agreement; that's why he's a lieutenant, and she still has a lot to learn.

"Exactly. That wretch will return home to whine to his father and demand that anyone who has dared to harm him be wiped off the face of the earth. And his father will do it because, despite Mikel being a complete idiot, he's his son, and he has to set an example. Family is family."

"Okay, I promise I won't mess it up," Sergeant Cruz Ortega affirmed.

Now she heads to the hospital where the two survivors remain in custody. She hopes that after receiving treatment and the calming effects of painkillers, Sergio Perea, the

only one of the three men she could talk to, will reveal more. This morning, when she arrived at the crime scene, she was convinced it was a settling of scores, just another one. A parking lot assault by a group of assailants who skidded in with a vehicle, according to the bar owner. They got out so quickly that the three men, who seemed agitated and were arguing about something, could barely react. They were beaten savagely, and she herself saw one of them being stabbed before running to the bar entrance to reopen and lock themselves in. Coincidentally, a patrol was passing by on a routine round. The tall man with a sickly face practically threw himself at them, asking them to stop.

As soon as they entered the parking lot, the attackers got into a silver SUV and fled the crime scene without them having a chance to note the license plate before getting out of the car to check the condition of the injured.

Sergeant Cruz Ortega identifies herself to the two Civil Guard officers guarding Sergio Perea's room and enters. The battered man looks at her from the bed with tired eyes and a face so swollen that Cruz is reminded of a pufferfish.

"How are you feeling?" she asks out of courtesy.

"What do you think?" Sergio responds wearily.

"I promise I'll let you rest soon. I just need you to answer a few questions, and I'll leave."

Sergio Perea sighs resignedly and agrees.



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"Earlier, you said they had kidnapped Mikel Blanco in the trunk of your car, a car they claim disappeared with him inside. Clarify that for me."

"It was just bad luck. We had already contacted Teodoro's people and negotiated the ransom. That parking lot seemed perfect for us to wait, big, poorly lit, and with no surveillance. We had sedated the guy, and we knew he wouldn't wake up and therefore wouldn't attract attention. There were a few hours left for the exchange..."

"Where was it supposed to take place?" the sergeant interrupts.

"They had to leave a bag with the money in the bus station parking lot, and once picked up and verified, we would give them Blanco's location."

"The bar parking lot."

"Yes. As I was saying, there were a few hours left for the exchange, and Piqui insisted on waiting inside the bar. It was going to be the deal of our lives, imagine," he laments with a snort.

No, Cruz can't imagine.

"All I can imagine is that one of your colleagues is in the morgue, and the other is teetering between life and death. You're lucky that patrol happened to be there."

Sergio Perea stays silent for a few seconds, lost in thought about how quickly things went wrong.

"I told Piqui it was better to stay in the car, but he insisted," he continues explaining. "We started drinking, you know, and our heads got hot enough for the keys to disappear without either of us realizing."

"They stole the car keys?" Sergeant Cruz asks, astonished. "Inside the bar?"

"It had to be there. When we came out and Piqui couldn't find them, we assumed maybe he dropped them on the way to the bathroom or on the way to the bar when we got out of the car. But when we reached the parking lot and saw the car was gone, we understood someone must have taken them."

"Whose car was it?" the sergeant tries to confirm, finding the story so surreal that she has no choice but to believe it.

"Piqui's."

"And where did he leave the keys for someone to take them?"

"He always had this habit of leaving everything on the table, keys, wallet, phone. The guy would walk into a bar and empty his pockets like he was at home. I always warned him to be more careful, but, well."

"Yes, I see."

Sergeant Cruz notes down the car's model, color, and license plate details she couldn't capture at the crime scene when Sergio Perea began hyperventilating during questioning, and the paramedic insisted on taking him. She makes a call to her colleague, asking him to verify the information, then hangs up and continues questioning Sergio Perea.

"Did you talk to anyone while you were in the bar?"

"Not that I remember. The three of us sat alone at a table, and we didn't exchange a word with anyone."

The sergeant jots down a reminder to return to the bar and interview the bartender. Her police mind races, exploring possibilities. What if the bartender overheard the three men discussing their plan and took advantage of serving them drinks to snatch the keys? It seems unlikely, considering he was the one who alerted the patrol. Nevertheless, she must check.

"Do you recall anything strange happening? Anyone suspicious in the bar?"

"No, nothing," Sergio asserts, though his answers in that regard provide little help to the sergeant, given that all three were drinking enough to be oblivious.

"Alright. How did they kidnap Mikel Blanco?" she asks, shifting gears.

"By chance, like I said. We knew the police was after his old man, and we figured they'd cough up a nice sum for him. We'd been investigating and tailing his men for a few weeks, hoping to locate him. Yesterday, Piqui and I were on stakeout in the car after trailing one of his guys to a warehouse. Jackpot! He walked in, and minutes later, Mikel walked out. Caught us off guard, didn't expect that jerk to be there, let alone strolling alone. We revved up the car, blocked his path, hopped out before he could react, and Piqui smacked him on the head with whatever he found. Threw him in the trunk and peeled out."

Sergeant Cruz Ortega is astonished by what she hears but says nothing and continues jotting down notes.

"How did you contact Teodoro?"

"With his son's phone. We snatched it and took it to a friend who unlocks them for

fifty bucks in no time. The contacts were all coded, you know, like nicknames or business names, pizza place, florist, tobacco shop, and such. We randomly called one, and the guy who answered thought it was Mikel calling. He wouldn't spill who he was, but he had to be someone powerful in the organization, close to Teodoro, 'cause he handled the whole negotiation. You know the rest."

"No, I don't. How much was Teodoro willing to pay you?"

"We asked for three million, one for each of us. Since we were risking our necks, we wanted it big."

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"And he agreed just like that?" Cruz questions, incredulous.

"Well, he tried to be stingy and got real mad, but Piqui made him think twice when he asked if he'd rather spill the beans or personally explain to Teodoro that his son bit the dust because of him."

Cruz inhales deeply, filling her lungs to the brim, and continues jotting notes. Unconsciously, she adds the word "fool" in the margin. She then records the phone model Sergio claims belonged to Mikel Blanco, aligning with the fact that they found two phones on the guy currently teetering between life and death.

"He said he needed a few hours to gather all that cash, and now I've got nothing else to tell you," concludes Sergio Perea, his eyes increasingly closed due to swelling.

"How do you think Teodoro's people knew you were in that specific bar?" Cruz persists.

"I've been thinking about that since I got here, can't figure it out," says Sergio, frowning.

Sergeant Cruz Ortega would love to tell him that people like Teodoro have better and more efficient means than the police, but she keeps quiet because the more she talks to him, the more foolish he seems. Now she's sure Sergio Perea was just a pawn obediently following Piqui's orders.

"Don't worry; I've got enough for now."

As Cruz gets into her car, ready to head to the bar owner's house to continue her investigation, her partner, Emilio Mora, calls her.

"I checked the data you gave me, and there's something interesting. Under the victim's name, there's a car matching the model and color you mentioned, but the license plate doesn't match."

"What do you mean it doesn't match?" Cruz asks, pulling out her notebook again.

"Just that. We have traffic camera images showing a car of that model and color between the time he claimed they were already in the bar and before the attack. It's the only vehicle of that model passing during that period. We're convinced it's his, but, like I said, the plate number doesn't match. I decided to look it up in the database. Turns out, the number belongs to a Seat León registered to Mireia Suárez, no criminal record. I contacted her, and she says she lent the car to her boyfriend yesterday so he could go out with his friends while she was at work. The short version is she went to check her car's plate in the garage, and someone had switched it with the number you gave me."

"Alright," Cruz sighs, finding everything too strange. "I'm going to talk to the bar owner. You hurry up the tech guys with the second phone Ángel Rozas had. Sergio Perea claims it belongs to Mikel Blanco and that they spoke to someone very close to Teodoro."

"Sure thing, but you know what they'll say, right? They've got a mountain of work, and I should just get in line," Cruz muttered, feeling the weight of urgency pressing against his chest.

"Talk to the lieutenant, explain what I've told you. He'll take care of speeding things up. The intel from that phone could be crucial to nailing Teodoro," advised the voice on the other end.

"Right now," Cruz affirmed before ending the call, his pulse quickening. No room for errors. He had to resolve the issue pronto. Discover who stole the car and, damn it, where the hell Mikel Blanco was. Another call before hitting the road checking if the agents he left in the area, scanning nearby shops for potential CCTV footage, had any leads.

"So far, just a couple of recordings showing the car passing by, but the visuals are crap. All we can say is there were at least two occupants. Tinted rear windows, and from our angle, impossible to tell if there were more," reported the agent.

"Understood. Keep searching," Cruz instructed, firing up the engine.

## Chapter 11

On their way back, Abigail and Gretel hashed out various options. Any escape from Mikel Blanco seemed appealing at first, but his threats lingered, casting a heavy cloud over their deliberations. Amidst the muddled brainstorming, Gretel throws out a thought that strikes a chord with Abigail.

"If he's Teodoro's son, he's probably as deep in this mess as his old man, even if they never talk about him in the news," Abigail muses.

"He might be lurking in the shadows, sheltered by daddy, but one thing's for sure he's got some valuable info for the cops," Abigail adds thoughtfully.

"What do you suggest?" Gretel senses Abigail's expression, a familiar one she's seen when Abigail's got a solution up her sleeve.

"Negotiate with the cops. We hand over Mikel Blanco in exchange for a clean slate," Gretel suggests, her eyes lighting up at the prospect.

"Do you think they'll go for it?" Gretel can't help but get excited at the thought.

"I hope so."

"How do we do it? We can't just walk into the police station; spill the beans, and expect a warm welcome. We'd end up in a cell, game over," Gretel shudders at the idea of spending a night in the slammer. She's watched enough movies to imagine the cold, the stench, the solitude, and the anxiety that come with it.

"Through here, don't miss the exit," Abigail reminds Gretel. "We won't be heading to the station. That would be a dumb move after everything we've done. We'll make the call from one of those payphones and try to negotiate."

Abigail falls silent, gently rubbing the side of her nose. Of all the places to itch, it chooses the one that throbs in pain.

As they pull into the garage, Mikel's shouts echo, insults and demands to be set free. The effects of the sedative seem to have worn off, or maybe he's just accustomed to such substances, Gretel contemplates.



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"Hey! Remember what I told you. Want me to come in and shut that big mouth of yours with tape?" Abigail threatens from outside.

"Where have you been? You can't keep me locked up forever, you damn bitches. It's inhuman," he spews with a slurred voice.

"Talking about humanity, coming from your lineage? We're treating you far better than what your father and you do to others," Abigail retorts sharply.

Mikel stays silent for a moment. Nervous and overwhelmed, he can't believe his luck. First, those damn bounty hunters kidnap him, and now, somehow, he ends up in the clutches of these two crazies who seem clueless about what to do with him.

"Have you considered what I told you?" he insists, desperate, unzipping his pants to relieve himself in the bottle. This time, he does it in the bottle; he's not so sure he'll get out of there quickly, and he can't stand his own stench.

"We're still working on it," Gretel responds, glancing at Abigail.

In truth, they hadn't even thought about it. The idea of negotiating with Teodoro Blanco isn't something they entertain. Just because they don't belong to the world of criminal gangs doesn't mean they're unaware that handing over Mikel won't fetch them a bag of money but a shovel to dig their own graves.

After threatening Mikel again, warning him of a gag if he screams, and emphasizing the need for silence to think, the two enter the house and head to the living room to finalize their plan.

"I don't think those phones are entirely secure," Gretel says when Abigail places them on the table.

"Why not? They're unregistered," Abigail says, confused.

"That just makes it impossible for the police to trace our names. They'll triangulate the signal, look for nearby repeaters, and narrow down a location," Gretel argues, focusing on her phone's screen as it lights up.

Abigail sees "Pol" written on the phone, making her uneasy, although Gretel remains silent, pressing the button to blacken the screen.

"This neighborhood is huge. Even if they pinpoint the call to the area and decide to search all the houses, they'll need a warrant. That takes time, not to mention the number of personnel needed if they want to do it quickly," Abigail concludes, tired of dealing with her company's lawyers and others, well aware that bureaucracy slows down any action.

Gretel gazes at Abigail without blinking, releasing a deep sigh until her lungs completely deflate. Despite the harshness of their predicament, Abigail's presence provides a sense of security.

"But you're right," Abigail continues. "What you're saying is valid. We need to buy time. So, as a precaution and to throw them off, we can drive half an hour away and make the call from there. It'll give them misleading information, but we can't forget they're the police. Tired of dealing with people who think they're smarter than them. We need to wrap this up quickly, Gretel. If we give them enough time, they'll find us one way or another."

Gretel isn't thrilled about that. She prefers the optimistic and determined Abigail because it's contagious and makes her believe they can pull it off.

"Positive thoughts," Gretel says, getting up. "Come on, I'll drive."

Abigail watches her walk ahead and smiles. Gretel has something that has completely captivated her in just a few hours. She doesn't know what it is, and she doesn't care. The only thought disturbing her is the idea of somehow ending up back with her foolish husband. What if he finally realizes the stupid mistake he made by leaving a woman like her and returns, regretful and begging for another chance? Gretel could easily succumb, as so many others do, and what's brewing between them wouldn't even get a chance to begin.

The executive is frightened by her own thoughts. In the rare moments she allows herself not to dwell on the overwhelming problem at hand, her mind conjures up plans with Gretel. She envisions going on trips with her, visiting a museum, having dinner at her place, or daily visits to the churro shop she talks about wanting to open. Abigail doesn't know why she thinks these things or why she smiles when she does. She's getting carried away with Gretel, a woman she knows because she fled her home when her husband announced he was leaving her for someone else. It's all complete madness; that's what her mother would say if she were alive, but Abigail can't help it. She likes Gretel.

## Chapter 12

Sergeant Cruz Ortega finally arrives at the bar owner's home, where she's arranged to meet him after calling and informing him that she needed to ask him a few questions. The man grumbles, insisting he's already spoken to the officers and shared everything he witnessed.

"I need you to explain it to me too," she said sharply, although she couldn't care less about what the man saw outside because she already knows. She wants to hear about what he witnessed inside.

"I was about to go to bed. With all this mess, I haven't had time to lie down."

"I promise it'll only take a few minutes," Cruz concluded before hanging up.

When the man opens his door, he gives her a look indicating his displeasure with her visit. Sergeant Cruz couldn't care less. As a civil guard, she's accustomed to those glares and much worse, often accompanied by muttered insults. The man lets her in, and she wrinkles her nose involuntarily at the unpleasant smell of the apartment. It's a mix of fried food and dirty laundry, a rancid and sticky odor that infiltrates your nostrils, lingering for hours even after you've left. They enter the living room bathed in a yellowish light. The bar owner hasn't raised the blinds and doesn't seem inclined to do so, as he just sat in a chair and gestures for Sergeant Cruz Ortega to do the same.

For a few seconds, she stands there, observing everything quite unabashedly. The man looks her up and down with disdain, wishing she would start talking and leave. Even he is surprised to have an attractive woman in his house and still want her gone.

"Do you mind?" she insists, pointing at the chair.

The analytical mind of Sergeant Cruz interprets the invitation to sit in a chair rather than on the couch as a hostile act. The man doesn't want her there; he's uncomfortable with her presence and has no desire for her to stay longer than necessary. She's glad to take a seat in the chair; the sofa is stained, and she's sure the smell would cling to her clothes and haunt her for the rest of the day, just like the scent that has already invaded her nose and reached her brain.

"Do you remember seeing the three men who were assaulted in the parking lot inside your bar?" she asks to start the conversation.

"Yes, they arrived around eleven or so. Sat at a table in the back," he responds

wearily.

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"Did they do anything that struck you as suspicious?"

The man glares at her and sighs. The question seems stupid to him.

"No," he replies firmly. "I'm a busy man, alright? I can't keep track of anything other than serving tables."

Cruz Ortega looks at him, blinks a couple of times, and continues with her questioning.

"One of them claims his friend left his car keys on the table, along with his wallet and phone. Did you notice that?"

"Yes," he answers quickly. "I had to ask him to clear it all when I served them the first time. The guy left it in the middle of the table like it was nothing. And when I asked him to make room, he just pushed it to the corner. Seemed careless, you know? Nowadays, nobody does that, especially leaving it on the corner of the table facing the aisle, where anyone could walk by and swipe your wallet without you noticing."

Cruz Ortega wholeheartedly agrees with the man, who, by the way, hasn't offered her a glass of water to drink. She finds him rude, and though she wouldn't accept it despite having a dry mouth, she thinks it would have been a nice gesture on his part.

"Until what time were they there?"

"I couldn't tell you. They stayed a long time, maybe until three in the morning or a bit later."

"And during all that time, they didn't talk to anyone?"

"No."

"I'd appreciate it if you took your time. Any detail you can remember is important."

"Why don't you ask them?" he asks with annoyance.

"Because one is dead, the other in a coma, and the third, between the alcohol he consumed here and the blows to his head, has enough trouble remembering his own name."

The man sighs and looks at the ceiling as if he could find some answer up there to make that pesky and impertinent cop leave his house. He searches his mind for anything. Thinks about all the people in his bar last night, packed since it was Friday, and then remembers something, but it seems like a trivial detail.

"There was, well, no. I don't think..."

"It's impossible that means nothing," he thinks, but the sergeant disagrees.

"What was it?"

"Nothing, it's nonsense," he downplays, looking back at the ceiling.

"Share it with me, and I'll decide if it's nonsense or not, please."

The man yawns, his mouth stretching so wide that Cruz fears his jaw might dislocate. She sees a thread of drool stretching from his lower to upper teeth, feeling a disgust so intense that, for the first time in her life, and perhaps in human history, one person's yawn doesn't transfer to another.

"They talked briefly to a couple of women there, but it was just a moment."

"A couple of women? Were they bar regulars? Had you seen them before? Why did that catch your attention?" the sergeant fires questions like a machine gun.

"I didn't say it caught my attention," the man grumbles, annoyed. "You asked me to tell you any detail I remembered."

"And you specifically told me that," Cruz interrupts him. "If you noticed them, it was for a reason."

This time, he interrupts her.

"Of course, I noticed. They were hot, the whole damn bar noticed, just like they would if you walked in."

The sergeant looks embarrassed. It's not the first time someone she interrogates or arrests makes reference to her good looks, but it's something she can't get used to and infuriates her.

"Weren't they regular customers?" she asks, redirecting the conversation.

"No, not at all. I hadn't seen those two in my life; I'd remember."



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"What time did they arrive?"

Sergeant Cruz Ortega is intrigued. They aren't the suspects she's looking for, but the fact that they were the only ones who spoke to the victims and it was their first time there feels, at the very least, like a coincidence worth considering.

"They didn't arrive together. The prim one came first, you know, the typical one who looks like she's never broken a plate. I didn't get what she was doing there, seemed lost and ended up in my bar by sheer chance. Ordered a beer, drank it while looking around like she was scared. The other came a bit later. She wasn't like the first one, oozed confidence from every pore. She looked loaded, if you catch my drift," he says, rubbing his thumb against his index finger. "The typical executive with an air of arrogance, but then she sat down and ordered a shot of tequila. Blew my mind."

"Did they know each other? Do you think they had planned to meet here?"

"I don't think so. They didn't greet each other initially, and if Miss Moneybags sat there, it was because it was the only vacant stool at that moment. They started talking when the executive invited the other to a tequila shot. I thought she'd collapse right there when she downed it. She tensed up, as if the liquid was burning her brain."

Cruz Ortega envisions the scene, finding it increasingly perplexing why two women like them would be in a dive bar filled with end-of-shift drunks.

"It seemed like they understood each other. They went to one of the tables, played a game of pool, and finally returned to the table, staying there until they left. They drank quite a bit for women."

Sergeant Cruz Ortega raises an eyebrow at the man's unfortunate comment. Despite realizing the sexism in his words instantly, he doesn't bother apologizing.

"But you say they talked to those men," the sergeant resumes the conversation, breaking the tension.

"Well, more of a collision than a talk. As they were leaving, they first went to the restroom." The man is interrupted by a sudden coughing fit, prompting Cruz to instinctively move away quickly to avoid potential splatters of drool.

She watches him turn red, which surprises her considering how pale the man is. As he gets up for a glass of water to clear his throat, she thinks that, despite what he claims about not paying attention to his customers, he paid a lot of attention to these two women. Then she remembers that they are women, and according to him, good-looking ones. Of course, he noticed them, and that's why he didn't notice anyone else.

"Sorry, my mouth gets dry when I talk a lot," the man says, returning to his seat.

"Don't worry. Are you feeling better?"

"Yes. So, as I was saying, they went to the restroom, and when they came out, one of them tripped and practically fell onto one of the guys, the one who's now a corpse, I guess."

"Fell onto him?" Cruz asks, surprised.

"Yeah, just for a moment. The other one quickly took charge and helped her up. I know the guy said something to them, but I don't know what it was."

"Do you remember which of the two tripped?"

The man looks puzzled by the question. What the hell does it matter?

"Yes, sure. It was the executive."

That confuses Sergeant Cruz Ortega even more. From the man's description, if there was one who could be clumsy, it was the other woman.

"The filthy guy groped her, you know?" he explains without her asking, as if that act had bothered him in a very particular way. "Took advantage while the poor thing was on top of him, and under the pretext of holding her, shamelessly grabbed her ass. I was surprised the woman didn't smack him right there; she seemed like the no-nonsense type. I wouldn't dare even to cough at her."

Sergeant Cruz Ortega also finds it suspicious that a woman like her would allow a stranger to grope her without protest. She wouldn't hesitate to slap him across the face with an open hand, and the sergeant has large hands.

"And you know what's funniest?" the man asks, as if his tongue suddenly loosened.

"What?"

"Before leaving, Moneybags paid for a round for those jerks. What kind of woman does that?" the man wonders aloud.

The sergeant's mind races through data until only one possible scenario makes sense: those two women wanted to buy time. Her heart quickens at that realization.

"Do you remember if they paid in cash or with a card?"

"With a card," he asserts without hesitation.

"The executive?"

"Indeed."

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"Do you have security cameras in the bar?"

"No, I told your colleagues this morning. Neither inside nor outside, mine's a quiet bar where there's nothing more than the occasional silly brawl," he replies, regaining his particular bad mood.

"Alright, you've been a great help. If you remember anything else, call me," she says, leaving her card on the table.

The man hasn't had time to pick it up when Sergeant Cruz Ortega says her goodbyes and exits his apartment as if she just saw the devil. She takes a deep breath of fresh air, scratching her nose as if that would rid her of the lingering scent that has settled inside.

As she gets into her car, she takes a few moments to process all the information. She stows the recorder in her bag along with the notepad. Cruz has numerous questions surrounding those women, unable to make connections anywhere, but one thing is clear to her: they stole the car.

### Chapter 13

Abigail and Gretel stand in the center of a coastal town in the province of Malaga. They've driven for almost thirty minutes to settle on this spot.

"Here, we're surrounded by houses. If they trace the call, let them look..." Abigail says, mentally exhausted.

Gretel unbuckles her seatbelt, and without exactly knowing what prompts her to do what she does, she leans over Abigail, placing a hand on the nape of her neck with a determination uncharacteristic of her, and kisses her, releasing some of the longing she feels for Abigail. The executive is not only unsurprised by the gesture but catches her in a moment of absolute need. That's the escape route she would like to take now, what she usually does when she feels very stressed – seek a bit of sex to help her unload and release all the tension.

When Gretel's tongue traces the line of her lower lip, Abigail ignites like a fuse and deepens the kiss, forgetting where they are and what time it is. Gretel is completely surrendered and about to yield to what Abigail's hands, surrounding and pulling her, demand of her leap onto her. Then they hear the laughter of some children a little further away, and both startle. They look around anxiously, thinking the kids were laughing at them, but all the children had done was come out of a doorway.

Abigail drops her head against the headrest and sighs before looking at Gretel and realizing she's being looked at in a way that makes her feel good. They maintain eye contact and hold hands in silence. Gretel strokes the top of Abigail's hand with her thumb, and Abigail lets her, closing her eyes for a moment.

"I need all of this to end."

Gretel holds onto her, a silent companion.

"Me too. And I want to talk with Pol. I never want to see him again."

Abigail feels a mix of relief and a twinge of guilt, finding solace in Gretel's desire to erase their shared past with that guy.

"The sooner we start, the sooner it ends."

Reluctantly, Abigail releases Gretel's hand, retrieving one of the phones from their recent acquisition. Waiting for it to power up, she swiftly dials the local police number on her own device. Putting it on speaker, she places it on her lap.

"I have information about Mikel Blanco's whereabouts," Abigail declares with unwavering determination as soon as the call connects. "I want to speak to the person in charge of the investigation."

"Can I have your name, please?" the voice on the other end inquires.

"I won't tell you anything. If you don't connect me with that person, I'll hang up and call the National Police. They might pay more attention."

"Wait a moment, please. Don't hang up," the guard responds, sensing the weight of potential crucial information.

A beep signals a pause, and a hollow sound fills the air as the officer converses with the relevant authority. Abigail takes the opportunity to exhale the breath she's been holding, locking eyes with Gretel, who remains wide-eyed, stunned by Abigail's strategic approach. Threatening to divulge information to another law enforcement body proves to be a shrewd move, considering the well-known tensions among them, each always vying to assert their dominance in the information hierarchy.

## Chapter 14

Sergeant Cruz Ortega barely has a moment to take a seat. She strides through the precinct door, leaving her belongings on the desk, when her lieutenant stands before her.

"We've got a call. They say it's a woman claiming to have information on Mikel Blanco. She's on hold, insisting she'll only talk to the person in charge. I'll have her

routed to Miguel, play the part of being in charge, and assess if the information is useful. How's it going on your end? Any progress?"

Lieutenant Álvaro Sanz whispers as he speaks, a habit ingrained in the precinct's culture. He acts as if they're lovers or hiding something. There's an unspoken trust between them, and Cruz is fed up with asking him to stop. She cares about him, but only as a friend, a sentiment he refuses to acknowledge.

"Quit the whispering, Álvaro," she urges again. "Get the call through; I'll handle it."

"You've got more important things, Cruz. This isn't the first call today claiming to have info. You know how this works. The case hits the news, and suddenly everyone remembers something or thinks they've seen something suspicious, or they've decided they want to mess with me."

"Or they want something in return for the info," she adds.

"Exactly, that too."



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"Connect me, Álvaro. Right now, my prime lead involves two women."

"Seriously?" He's surprised, but he never questions her dedication.

"Seriously. And I need you to get an order for the bank to give us all transactions from that bar between midnight and 3 AM."

"Judge Herrero is on duty. Shouldn't be a problem," he replies.

Álvaro snaps his fingers to grab the attention of a corporal, phone pressed to his shoulder, awaiting instructions. The lieutenant signals him to pass the call to Sergeant Cruz, and the young man adjusts the phone to his ear.

The lieutenant retreats to his office, leaving Cruz to take a seat. She grabs her notepad, jotting down the bar's name, La Tapia, in bold letters. Circling it, she signals to Corporal Gustavo Molina, part of her team since the case was assigned this morning.

"As soon as we have the order, get data on any woman who paid with a credit card at this place last night," she instructs, handing him the note.

"I'll get on it right away," Gustavo replies.

"Any more images?" she asks.

"In all the images we've got so far, nothing relevant. Same old story – license plate and model, but no occupants. As for the assailants, the vehicle's plate matches a

stolen SUV reported two nights ago. It turned up near the port. We're analyzing it, and I've sent a couple of agents to check the area's cameras."

Cruz Ortega, in any other circumstance, would be furious. Yet, not this time. She restrains her anger, knowing they can track down the woman once they get the bank's data. She's aware that even with the order today, it'll take time – offices shut on weekends, and no matter how many calls they make, they won't get anything until Monday. As for the assailants, she holds a potent tool – her two informants. A supposedly retired car thief with connections to the city's underbelly through his strategically located bar in a troubled zone. Cops always have their own sources, people with charges still roaming free in exchange for valuable intel when needed. Her other source is a small-time drug dealer who deals grass on a minor scale. He'll pay them a visit when he takes the call.

## Chapter 15

"Still there?" the agent asks Abigail a long minute later.

"Yes," she replies, nerves strangling her voice.

"I'm transferring you to Sergeant Ortega, she's in charge. Don't hang up, please."

Abigail and Gretel exchange glances, nodding with sighs of relief. Gretel holds Abigail's hand again, not just to offer comfort but also because she's grateful Abigail is the one making the call. If it were Gretel, stammers and potential slips would have already revealed them.

"I'm Sergeant Ortega. Who am I speaking to?" the woman on the other end responds.

"Who I am doesn't matter; what matters is what I can tell you," Abigail replies, a confidence that freezes Gretel, whose left leg moves compulsively.

"Fine, I'm listening," Cruz Ortega says, pen in hand, despite low expectations for the call.

"I know what happened to Mikel Blanco."

"Listen," the sergeant interrupts, exhaling. "I've got a lot on my plate, can't afford to waste a second. If you're calling to tell me something I already know, do us both a favor and hang up."

Abigail feels her heart race even faster.

"You haven't let me finish," Abigail protests.

"Then make it quick," Cruz presses.

"I know where that man is. Does that sound better?"

"It depends on whether you can prove what you're saying is true."

"Alright, I'm listening," Cruz Ortega responds, pen in hand, though not holding high expectations for the call.

"I know what happened to Mikel Blanco."

"Listen," the sergeant interrupts with a sigh, "I've got a lot of work ahead, and I can't afford to waste a second. If you're calling to tell me something I already know, do us both a favor and hang up."

Abigail feels her heart racing even faster.

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"You haven't let me finish," Abigail protests.

"Then make it quick," Cruz presses.

"I know where that man is. Does that sound better?"

"It depends on whether you can prove what you're saying is true."

"I can, though not right now. Listen, this is a colossal mistake. We dared to do something stupid, got ourselves into a serious mess without intending to," Abigail spills.

Sergeant Cruz Ortega falls silent as she thinks. The woman spoke in the plural. It's them.

"Alright, I'm listening. You have two minutes to summarize the situation, and don't lie to me."

"Last night, I went to that bar and met another woman. Both of us were fed up with certain things, and we decided we needed some excitement in our lives."

The sergeant can't believe what she's hearing.

"We decided to steal a car. All we wanted was to take it for a spin, nothing more. Then we'd park it nicely somewhere, and the owner would have it back."

"And you stumbled upon a surprise in the trunk, right?" the sergeant decides to

intervene, given the circumstances she needs to ask questions.

"Exactly. We didn't realize until the end, when we had decided to leave the car."

"Let's say, hypothetically, I believe you. Why haven't you handed Mikel over? If you claim it was all bad luck, why didn't you call the police earlier?"

"Because he threatened us," Abigail responds, explaining to the sergeant the literal words Mikel used.

The sergeant is developing serious reasons to believe the woman on the phone is telling the truth. Despite the convoluted car theft story, it answers the nagging question in the sergeant's mind. Why would she use her credit card if she intended to kidnap someone? It makes no sense. However, it does if they were just aiming to pull off a prank they were confident they wouldn't get caught doing. Another point supporting the validity of their story is Mikel's death threats and attempted bribery, typical behavior for criminals of his kind.

"Why not tell me your name so I can address you properly?" Cruz Ortega insists now that her caller seems more confident.

"I don't want my name on any records," Abigail responds firmly.

"What do you mean?"

"I want to negotiate. I'll hand over Mikel, and in return, our names won't appear in any databases."

"You want us to drop the charges against you," the sergeant says, raising her eyebrows, surprised by her audacity.

"Exactly."

"That's not so simple. You just admitted to stealing the car, and on top of that, when you found the stowaway in the trunk and decided not to turn him in, you committed illegal detention."

"We didn't kidnap him," protests Abigail indignantly.

"But you're holding him against his will, which, for all intents and purposes, is the same thing. Listen carefully; it's only a matter of time before I find out who you are. One of you paid at La Tapia bar with a credit card."

Abigail's breath catches, and she looks at Gretel, whose complexion has paled at least four shades.

"I assume it was you, right? I'm sure it was," the sergeant affirms without letting her answer. "In every criminal duo, there's always a leader. In this case, it's you. And, as I said, it's only a matter of time before I find out your name, your address, and every last detail about you. I'll arrest both of you, charging you with theft, illegal detention, and obstruction in an ongoing criminal investigation."

"You can't do that," Gretel intervenes, scared, participating in the conversation for the first time.

"Of course, I can."

Sergeant Cruz Ortega falls silent, letting her last words resonate and have an impact on the two women. She wants to play her own card. If they truly have Mikel, they can set up an operation to lure his father, who is the real target. What the sergeant doesn't expect is Abigail's response.

"Alright, if there's no way to get rid of the charges, we'll release Mikel in some deserted spot right now and get rid of any evidence linking us. In that case, when they catch up with us, they can only accuse us of theft. Since neither of us has a criminal record, it'll just result in a fine I can easily pay," Abigail says, almost breathless, under Gretel's astonished gaze, who clasps her hands as if praying for Abigail's words to be possible.

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The sergeant bites her lips and covers the earpiece, not only because she feels like slamming the device but also because Corporal Gustavo Molina has approached to inform her of something seemingly important.

"They've just located the BMW. It's been torched near an abandoned farmhouse," he whispers, escalating her anger. "Firefighters are on the scene, and I've already informed the forensic team, but from what I've been told, it's a lost cause; it's completely burnt."

"Thanks, Gus," she murmurs.

Abigail and Gretel feel like fainting under the sergeant's prolonged silences. For all of Abigail's composure and cold-bloodedness, that woman manages to destabilize her. Plus, she knows the sergeant is right; they'll be found. It's only a matter of time before they locate them, and then they'll have nothing left to do whatever they decide, they must do it quickly.

"Let's stop the nonsense once and for all," the sergeant speaks again. "Continuing this conversation is pointless if I have no proof that you really have Mikel Blanco detained."

"Do you think I'd be calling you and trying to negotiate if it weren't true?" Abigail retorts angrily.

"You have no idea how many calls we get from people claiming to have Mikel or possessing valuable information. Give me proof, or this call ends in five seconds."



"What proof do you need?"

Sergeant Ortega sighs and thinks quickly. She doesn't have time to devise a plan with her lieutenant or seek permission to strike a deal. If they hang up, she'll lose them, along with crucial time before finding them through other means.

"I want to see him in person."

"And the hell with that," Abigail responds, offended. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"Listen first, decide later. I'll go alone wherever you tell me, unarmed and like any other citizen. I won't take any action against you or expose you. If I confirm you really have Blanco and he's in good health, I'll try to negotiate a deal in your favor. You have my word."

"You understand we can't trust your word."

"They must do it; that's their best move right now. I know the bank will confirm their identity within hours," the sergeant lies, "and then you'll have nothing to negotiate. We'll come after you and your companion, and I assure you there won't be a place to hide. We'll find you, rescue Blanco, and you'll go straight to the cell until a judge orders provisional detention, which won't take long."

The sergeant falls silent, letting her last words sink in for the two women. Abigail and Gretel exchange glances. Gretel's eyes welled with nerves and fear of jail, while Abigail struggles to maintain composure. She won't allow a foolish act to ruin both their lives.

"This is what we'll do," Abigail says in a neutral tone, as if the sergeant's words hadn't affected her, despite trembling inside and feeling nauseous. "I'll give you two hours; that's the time you have to get us an agreement. I want immunity for both, and

it's non-negotiable. I respect you, Sergeant Ortega, but talk to whoever you need to and do whatever it takes to get what I'm asking for, or I'll keep my word and set Mikel free. I have a feeling that's not in your interest."

The sergeant senses the clear determination of her interlocutor and doesn't know whether to shout at her or applaud her.

"And what if I find you before two hours?" the sergeant challenges her.

"We'll take that risk," Abigail responds without blinking.

"Alright," the sergeant concedes, "write down my personal phone number."

Gretel takes out her phone, jotting down the sergeant's number with trembling fingers and an uncomfortable cold sweat running down her spine.

"Send me proof of Mikel's life, and as soon as I receive it, I'll try to get what you're asking for, though I can't promise anything; two hours is very little time."

"An hour and a half," Abigail interrupts, "we won't be able to send you proof of life earlier, so you'll have to hurry, Sergeant. I'd start preparing the ground if I were you."

"I won't lift a finger without proof of life. In fact, until I receive it, I'll use all my resources to expedite your identification. You better hurry."

The sergeant doesn't speak without reason. She despises being told what to do or being blackmailed, well aware that identifying the woman in such a short time is impossible. Nevertheless, she's determined to give it her all.

After ending the call, Abigail jumps out of the car, retching what little she had in her stomach that morning. She takes out the phone card and burns it with a lighter from

her purse. Grinding the phone underfoot, she tosses it in the trash, leaving Gretel, who has also exited the car, watching in astonishment.

"Feeling better?" Gretel asks, swallowing nervously.

Abigail clears her throat, coughing a couple of times before turning to spit out the lingering taste of vomit.

"It's nothing," she says after a deep, deliberate sigh. "Come on, we need to send her the proof as soon as possible."

"It's a risky move," Gretel comments on the way back. "If she finds us before..."

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"Sorry for not consulting you," Abigail apologizes. "But it's the only thing I could think of. She has my data, Gretel; it's only a matter of time before she identifies me. I won't betray you, but if they search my house, they'll find your DNA everywhere, and they won't take long to locate you. Today is Saturday, and banks don't work. No matter how many contacts that woman has or how many doors she rings, I doubt she'll get the information before two hours."

"What if she can't get them to accept our deal?"

"In that case, we'll have to keep our word and release Mikel. I'll cover both of our legal expenses, so don't worry about that. What I'm saying is true, Gretel; if they find nothing tying us to that bastard, they can only charge us with car theft, and we won't go to jail for that."

"Okay," Gretel sighs with relief, feeling safe again with Abigail. "As soon as we arrive, we'll take a picture of that pig and send it to her. Then we'll put him in the trunk and thoroughly clean that storage room so there's no trace of him."

Abigail looks at her, nodding with a half-smile of satisfaction. It takes Gretel a moment to react, but when she does, it's with a determination that impresses Abigail deeply.

"When everything's set," Gretel continues, oblivious to the racing pulse she's inducing in her companion, "we take the car and head to an open field to wait. If the sergeant doesn't hold up her end by the deadline, we release that pig and head straight to a car wash to clean the trunk thoroughly."

Gretel shoots a quick glance at Abigail when she finishes speaking, seeking her opinion on the proposed plan.

"I'd fuck you right now, Gretel, seriously," Abigail says, biting her lip. "You have no idea how much I want to."

Gretel feels her throat go dry, air escaping her lungs, and her pulse quickens, while something throbs uncontrollably between her legs. She clenches them, swallowing hard, not daring to respond because what she'd say seems improper for her.

Despite the circumstances, Abigail can't help but flash a mischievous smile at the effect her words have had on her companion.

"Okay," Gretel finally says, her voice strained. "Let's sort this out, and then you can do all those things you're thinking."

## Chapter 16

Sergeant Cruz Ortega is in a foul mood. She dislikes being given orders, especially ultimatums. Glancing at the clock, she calculates the time available. In half an hour, she can't accomplish much, yet she grabs her car keys and heads decisively towards the city's most troubled area. She can make progress on the other front she has open – identifying the assailants.

Entering La Palanca, a bar whose name seems fitting for the place, considering its current owner has a hefty record for car thefts she keeps in check. She has solved many cases thanks to his information.

"What do you want now? I haven't done anything. I've finally become an honest citizen," protests the owner as she sits at the end of the bar, fixing her gaze on him.

"I want information, you know that."

"I don't know anything."

"Well, you better know something, Palancas, because otherwise, all the evidence I have against you will land on a judge's desk first thing in the morning."

Paco Reina, or Palancas as the sergeant calls him, exhales, scanning both ends of the bar to ensure nobody pays them too much attention.

"What do you want to know?" he asks while serving the sparkling water she just ordered. "Lately, I haven't been keeping up with much."

"The assault this morning in a parking lot."

"I don't want trouble with Teodoro's people, Sergeant," he huffs, containing his voice.

"So, you know what I'm talking about?"

"Don't need to be a genius. That shit's been all over the news this morning. Is it true they kidnapped that bastard's son? Damn, you've got to have some serious balls to do that or be a complete idiot," he chuckles.

The sergeant thinks it's the latter but keeps it to herself.

"What do you know about it?"

"Not much. Sometimes, I overhear comments, you know, but not much has been said. Just that those guys kidnapped Mikel and demanded a ransom."

"I know that too. Give me something I don't know, Palancas, or I swear..."

"Okay, okay," he interrupts, leaning in over the bar. "Word around here is one of them betrayed the others."

"One of them? What the hell are you talking about?" she asks, bewildered.

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"That one of the kidnappers contacted Teodoro's people and told them where they'd find Mikel. The sly bastard asked for a smaller amount of money to disappear on his own. You've got to be stupid to pull something like that. Did he really think those guys would hand him a bag of cash and let him walk away?"

Sergeant Cruz Ortega looks at him in disbelief. The whole case, in general, seems like a mess, a series of absurdities that led a man to his death, two to the hospital, and likely prison when they get out. Most confounding, two women burdened with undeserved records just because they felt the need to misbehave for once in their lives.

"And what about the robbery?" the sergeant probes.

"I don't know anything about that; it must have been Teodoro's thugs. That's what I would've done – get my kid back first, then take out the ones responsible. It's absurd to think otherwise."

The sergeant Cruz Ortega had initially considered this theory but dismissed it once her lieutenant, who also has his own contacts, confirmed that Mikel was still missing.

"Alright, if you hear anything else, I hope you'll give me a call," concludes the sergeant.

"Sure," responds Palancas, and they both know he won't call.

Exiting the bar, the sergeant checks her watch; twenty-five minutes have passed. If the two women were telling the truth, she should soon receive proof that they have



Mikel Blanco. She gets into her car, calls her lieutenant on speakerphone, and updates him on the assault.

"What a fool," her superior murmurs, equally surprised. "Don't waste time figuring out which one did it. If it was the deceased, we'll never know, and if it was one of the others, he won't admit it."

"I know," she replies. "I'm heading back to the headquarters. I'm waiting for confirmation that, if true, will require your consent for a deal."

"A deal? With whom?"

"With the people holding Mikel. I'll explain when I get there. I'll let you go; I have another call."

Ending the call with a racing pulse, she's somewhat disappointed when the incoming call isn't from the women but from Sergeant Gustavo Molina. He informs her that a tech colleague is already investigating Mikel Blanco's phone, and they have a judge's order to trace and locate all the numbers in his contacts. Astonished by how quickly judicial orders are issued in certain cases, she would usually instruct him to pass the information to her lieutenant, who leads the operation against Teodoro. However, as she's almost there, she decides to handle it herself.

"Thanks, Gus. Keep me posted."

## Chapter 17

Abigail and Gretel reverse the car into the garage, leaving the trunk open and ready to contain Mikel. The young man has started screaming as soon as they entered; he's unhinged, cursing and threatening incessantly.

"We're going to let you go," announces Abigail on the other side of the door, attempting to calm him.

Mikel's immediate attention is captured, and he gulps down water to clear his throat before speaking.

"Are you going to release me? Just like that?" he questions nervously.

"Yes, just like that."

Abigail approaches the door, pressing her ear against it.

"Have you reached an agreement with my father?"

"We haven't reached an agreement with anyone. This is all a mistake, and we're exhausted. We want to end this once and for all."

"How do I know you won't screw me over? You're a bunch of incompetent bitches..."

"And thanks to that, you're still alive," Abigail cuts him off. "Do you want to get out of here or not?"

"Yes, damn it."

Abigail hears him spit. She can't guess where that disgusting mess has landed – the floor, the wall, the door, or even the mattress. They'll have to clean everything thoroughly.

"Alright, here's the plan. You stay very still in the corner when I come in. You'll go back into the car trunk; we'll take you to some open space not far from the road and leave you there."

"Can't you drop me at a gas station, you damn bitches?"

"We'll leave you there, and that's it. I'm opening the door now. Don't do anything stupid; I mean it."

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Both women cover their faces, as always, while Mikel contemplates a thousand ways to kill them. He's fed up, and the idea of going back into the trunk doesn't appeal to him. Still, he's sure that, in case they don't keep their word, he'll have a better chance of attacking when he's outside that room and not tied up. Despite his attempts, untying the knot has proven impossible.

Abigail opens the door, and the stench inside momentarily paralyzes them both. The thought of having to clean that turns their stomachs. They curse the moment they chose that car, not the act of stealing.

Making it easy for them, Mikel wants them to trust him, not see him as a threat. When they release him, he plans to attack, intending to kill both of them with his bare hands. They blindfold him with a scarf so he can't see Abigail's car, and they tape his mouth to silence his screams. Before they cover his eyes, Gretel manages to snap a couple of photos with the second phone they bought. As soon as they lower the gate, they send the message to Sergeant Cruz Ortega along with the remaining time: one hour and twenty-two minutes. They also add the warning that the phone won't be operational until fifteen minutes before the agreed time. Then, they turn it off and get to work.

Abigail carries the cleaning supplies as Gretel empties a metal trash can in the garage. They don masks and gloves, Abigail's gardening gloves, and dive into a race against time. Hauling the mattress to the garden, they strip off its cover and toss it into the metal bin alongside an empty water bottle and the ropes used to bind Mikel. Abigail pours out a plastic bottle filled with Mikel's urine into the drain, discarding it in the trash as well. While Gretel sprays everything with alcohol, setting it ablaze, Abigail uses a hose to flush the drain.

With the bin ablaze in the garden, they enter the storage room. Walls and floor get a dousing of bleach, each armed with a scrubber. They clean every nook and cranny in record time. Exiting, they douse the mattress with bleach, pouring a bottle of turpentine on it, any product that might erase traces of DNA, despite the mattress having a cover.

"I think this should do it," Gretel says, sighing, as Mikel squirms uncomfortably, wondering why they haven't left yet.

They gaze at the bin where only embers remain; the mattress cover, rope, and bottles are obliterated. A hose douses the bin to quell the smoke and cool the metal.

"We'll leave it at the back, and when it's all over, we'll toss it," Abigail says, pointing at the mattress and bin.

They do just that, then hop in the car, heading to an open field to wait. They'll turn on the phone fifteen minutes before the deadline, as they've told the sergeant.

## Chapter 18

Sergeant Cruz Ortega senses the vibration in her pocket just as she concludes explaining everything to Lieutenant Álvaro Sanz. He answers the phone, making a call and issuing instructions to the operation she's not part of but hopes to join someday. She seizes the moment to pull out her phone, unlocking it to see, once again, the message notification from an unknown number, her heart pounding with anticipation.

She taps the chat, opens the image, and stares without blinking. It reveals a man inside the trunk of a car. She zooms in on the image to scrutinize his face and is amazed to confirm that it is indeed Mikel Blanco. Glancing at Lieutenant Álvaro Sanz with anticipation, she waits for him to end the call. The women aren't lying, as

she suspected from the beginning.

"I've located Mikel Blanco," she blurts out as soon as the lieutenant hangs up.

He raises his eyebrows, openly expressing surprise, and opens both hands in a gesture inviting her to continue. The sergeant elaborates on everything she has uncovered so far, starting with the bar owner's information, the call from the women confirming her theory that they were responsible for the robbery, and concluding with showing him the photo, indicating that they indeed have him captive.

"Damn," he exclaims in disbelief. "What those women did is..."

"Incredible, I know," she continues, nodding.

"Do you believe them? Do you think it was genuinely just bad luck?"

"I can't confirm it."

"What does your intuition tell you, Cruz? If we want Mikel, we have to act quickly, as you've said. There's no way to expedite the identification of the person who used the card any further. If they keep their word within the deadline, we'll lose a valuable opportunity."

The lieutenant struggles to reconcile this information with his rational mind. To him, it made sense that it was a gang opposing Teodoro, a rival who learned of Mikel Blanco's whereabouts. However, reality turned out to be something entirely different a twist of fate that seems lifted from a dark comedy.

"Trust me, they're not lying," the sergeant replies. "No motive. Two women who don't fit any gang profile, with no interest in getting involved in something like this. According to the bar owner, one seemed like a scared prude, and the other, a well-off

executive. In my view, they ended up there purely by chance, some inexplicable desire to spice up their dull lives, making the misguided decision to steal a car that, unfortunately, came with an unwanted bonus. This whole case is a series of absurdities, Álvaro, but if retaining Mikel for the operation is beneficial, you should accept the deal. I don't know the woman's background I spoke to, but she knew what she was talking about. If they release Mikel, and we can't prove he was with them, we can only charge them with car theft. Not even that; the only evidence we have is their word, and once they hire a lawyer who advises them to deny everything, we'll be left with nothing."

Lieutenant Álvaro nods approvingly, fully agreeing with his subordinate.

"When we have nothing else to work with, all we've got is our intuition, Cruz. I'll talk to the judge. Arresting Mikel could be pivotal for the operation. As far as I understand, he's not cut from the same cloth as his father. We don't have much against him, but enough to detain him and stretch the seventy-two hours of interrogation. By the time we're done with him, we should have enough information to nab his father, I'm sure."

"So, do I tell them we accept the deal?"

"Yes, but let them know it comes with a clause. The agreement is valid to absolve them of any involvement in car theft and the holding of a civilian. However, if we discover any ties to a gang or they've concealed vital information for the case, the deal is null and void."

"I'll wait for you to get the judge's consent," she says, eyeing her watch.

"Not necessary. I've already told you, Judge Noelia Herrero is on duty, and you know she doesn't usually object much in these cases. I'll have to answer a few questions, but she'll accept that agreement. She's one of the few who still believes in second

chances, and those two women aren't even criminals. We don't have much time, Cruz; you'll have to organize it so it doesn't look like they're the ones handing over Mikel, or else..."

"I know. Teodoro will order their execution even from behind bars if you manage to catch him."

Sergeant Cruz Ortega rises from her chair, leaves the lieutenant's office, and heads to her desk. Once seated, she sighs and tries to call them, but there are still forty minutes until the deadline, and, as warned, the phone shows no signal. She takes the opportunity to call Sergeant Gustavo Molina.

"Prepare a car for us and a support patrol. I want everything ready at the door when I tell you."



"Right away," he responds without questioning his sergeant.

The sergeant likes the way the corporal works; he's efficient and follows orders without seeking explanations. This has spared her the embarrassment of refusing to answer, as in a case like this, the fewer people who know the mission's details, the better. She can't risk the information leaking and reaching Teodoro's ears. Despite all being good agents, there's always someone who spills the beans for a few bills.

The phone rings, and for a moment, she thinks it's them. However, the information she receives leaves her stunned, or worse, in a very delicate situation. Once again, and not to lose the pattern that has developed around this case, they might be on the verge of discovering one of their identities in the most absurd and coincidental way possible.

"Let him in immediately," she responds and hangs up in disbelief.

### Chapter 19

Gretel can't stop tapping her fingers on her knee while obsessively checking the clock, watching the minutes pass agonizingly slow. She has blocked her husband Pol on the phone because he wouldn't stop sending messages, making her even more nervous.

Abigail watches Gretel and swallows hard. She wishes she could tell her to stop that constant leg bouncing, but her own right leg is possessed, bouncing endlessly while Mikel whimpers non-stop in the car trunk, heightening both their nervousness. They've halted in the midst of a grove near the road, the car strategically positioned

for a quick escape if needed. They've planned it out: they'll blindfold Mikel so he can't identify the car or Abigail's license plate, and they'll slip a tiny, dull blade into his pocket just sharp enough to delay him cutting the tape on his hands until they're long gone.

With one minute left before they must turn on the phone, they grip each other's hands tightly, a firm declaration that they're in this together. Nervous sweat dampens their palms, and their fingers slip, yet Abigail brings Gretel's hand to her lips, leaving them pressed together for a few seconds, eyes closed. Gretel wishes this moment could last forever; if the touch of Abigail's lips on this basic part of her body makes her shiver, she dreads to think about the effect in a more sensitive spot.

Finally, the minute hand hits the fifteen-minute mark, and Abigail powers on the phone. They exchange a look, fully aware that this is likely the most crucial call they'll ever make. Stepping out of the car, they move a bit away to ensure Mikel can't overhear any part of the impending conversation.

With their hearts echoing loudly in their ears, Abigail places the phone on a tree branch at head height. Both women fix their gaze on it as if worshipping some sacred artifact. The minutes start ticking away in the most torturous manner they've ever experienced.

"He's not going to call," Gretel whispers, sweating, with three minutes left.

"He has to, even if it's just to tell us he rejects the deal, he has to call," Abigail responds, frowning, keeping her eyes fixed on the device.

"How do you know? We said we'd release him; if they don't accept the deal, he shouldn't care about what we do."

"He does care; don't forget he's a Civil Guard."

Abigail strives to sound convincing, but the truth is she has serious doubts too. Two minutes left, she instinctively glances at the trunk, envisioning the moment when they open it, release Mikel, and make their escape. Then the phone rings.

Sergeant Cruz Ortega deliberately waited fourteen long minutes to call, heightening the two women's nerves, a fact unbeknownst to them.

"How are you both doing?" she asks, puzzling them.

"We've had better days," grumbles Abigail. "Do you have an answer? Remember, one minute left."

"I do. Can Gretel hear me too?" she replies, an eerie calm in her voice.

Hearing Gretel's name from the sergeant's mouth freezes both women. Gretel feels her legs weaken, and Abigail grabs her arm as she wobbles.

"Because one of you is named Gretel, right? Gretel Martínez Alaveda."

## Chapter 20

For a moment, Abigail is so bewildered she doesn't know what to say. Yet, she permits herself only that because she's a woman with the exceptional ability to stay calm in extreme situations. Moreover, she knows she must be the one to respond, seeing the look on Gretel's face as if she'd seen a ghost.

"Give us a second," Abigail says, trying to buy time to comprehend what just happened.

"Of course," the sergeant replies, relishing the moment.

Gretel's lips start trembling, then she turns pale, and finally, her eyes well up fear and uncertainty gripping her as she grapples with the sergeant having uncovered her identity. Gretel's identity.

Abigail cups her face, ignoring the phone still there with the sergeant waiting for them to speak. She guides Gretel backward, putting enough distance so she can't hear them. Abigail's analytical and agile mind, working at lightning speed during this brief journey.

She can't fathom how they identified Gretel. It eludes her, considering the only lead they had to track them was hers the credit card, not Gretel's.

"It's okay," she whispers, trying to soothe her.

"What do you mean it's okay?" Gretel sobs, trembling.

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"They've identified you. It's something we knew would happen sooner or later, but I repeat, it changes nothing. We'll release Mikel, and they won't have any evidence against us."

Gretel once again feels that reassuring aura in Abigail's presence, exhaling all the air from her lungs as if it carries away the panic she harbors. Her teary gaze locks onto Abigail, who responds with a tired yet genuine smile, then unexpectedly kisses her intensely. Their lips collide with force, creating a series of audible smacks, and Abigail extends one of the kisses, applying intense pressure on Gretel's face. Gretel feels better than ever and doesn't want it to end. She clutches Abigail's shirt with both hands, twisting the fabric out of her pants.

"I won't leave you alone, I swear on my life," the executive whispers amid the relentless kisses. "We're in this together, and no matter what happens, we'll stay that way."

Abigail's assurance manages to quell Gretel's fear, but not the vibrations, tingling sensations, and shivers induced by her kisses.

"Ready?" Abigail asks, pausing to press her forehead against Gretel's, as if preparing for a rugby match.

"Ready."

They walk to the tree, and Abigail picks up the phone.

"Well done, Sergeant. You know Gretel's name; I congratulate you, but that changes

nothing," she declares, flaunting the unwavering confidence she can summon at will.

"Do you really believe that?" the sergeant questions.

The sergeant's query makes Abigail hold her breath, but she allows herself only a fraction of a second to do so nothing more.

"Yes, I do. The agreed time has elapsed. We're releasing Mikel and ending this crap," she asserts resolutely.

"Wait," the sergeant requests just as Abigail is about to end the call, the uncertainty evident in Gretel's gaze. "The agreement is in place."

Abigail and Gretel exchange perplexed glances, hearts racing, and an overwhelming warmth flushing their cheeks.

"Is there an agreement?" Abigail blinks, incredulous.

"There is, as long as you hand over Mikel Blanco safe and sound."

"How do I know you're not lying?" Abigail inquires.

"It's been twenty seconds since my team tracked your call. I know exactly where you are, and I'm on my way. You can try to run if you want, but we'll catch you before you hit the road. Not recommended, I assure you."

Abigail stares at the phone, feeling anger surge within her. How could she have been so foolish not to consider that the sergeant had everything planned for the second call? And to think, she gave away valuable time when she put her on hold. She committed the same error most criminals make believing they're smarter than the police.

"Solving Mikel and running won't do you any good now," the sergeant continues, the calmness of someone who knows they hold all the cards. "When we catch up with you and rest assured we will we'll impound your car, securing evidence that Mikel was in that trunk. So do yourselves a favor and accept the deal before I change my mind."

"Alright," Abigail interjects, growing increasingly nervous. "What's your proposal?"

"All you have to do now is wait for us. When we're very close, I'll give you the signal, and you'll proceed to release Mikel. Make sure he doesn't suspect at any moment that you've made a deal with the Civil Guard. We'll sound the sirens when he's out of the car, and you'll obey my men when I order them to stop you. Clear?"

"Crystal clear," Gretel responds this time.

"I'm serious. You must pretend very well because if that bastard suspects you've sold him out, he won't stop until he sees you in a hole."

"How long until you get here?" Abigail asks.

"Three minutes at most."

"In that case, we should start getting him out of the car. It's not easy moving that man."

"Alright, proceed, but don't let him escape, or there will be no deal," Sergeant Cruz Ortega reminds them.

Abigail hangs up and puts the phone in her pocket.

"Do you think she'll keep her word?" Gretel asks, distressed.

"I hope so. Initially, I thought she might be bluffing, but she hasn't asked us where we are, and that means she genuinely has us located. Let's not dwell on it, Gretel; the damage is done, and we'll face whatever comes. Let's go."



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Both head straight to the rear of the car, where Mikel Blanco continues whimpering and writhing, suffocated while thinking they won't fulfill what they promised. The uncertainty makes him very nervous and scared, contemplating the possibility that they might hand him over to his father's enemies. This thought sends shivers down his spine, and he attempts to scream until he turns as red as a tomato. Then, they finally open the trunk.

He'd like to unleash a torrent of insults, grab them by the neck with his own hands, and squeeze while impassively watching the life escape those two bitches.

"Sorry for the wait, but we had to make sure no one's around," Abigail says.

Gretel smiles despite the circumstances because her partner always finds ways to justify everything they do to Mikel. He stays still upon hearing her and feels an unwarranted relief.

"I'm going to help you get out, don't do anything stupid," Abigail warns him while scanning in all directions, trying to spot the cavalry.

Mikel, his mind cooler after confirming no one has shot him, remains faithful to his initial plan of appearing compliant to gain their trust. He extends his bound hands, inviting the woman to take hold and pull him. In truth, the assistance is welcome; his body's muscles were starting to numb. Abigail seizes both hands, and Gretel grabs his pants' belt, hauling him out of the car. The young man drops to his knees, exhaling in his own darkness, attempting to say something.

"As you can imagine, we won't remove the tape from your mouth or eyes," Abigail

explains, her heart racing like a racehorse. She sees a dust cloud rising above the treetops, most likely caused by Sergeant Ortega and her team.

Mikel grunts, red with anger, and sweat droplets splatter everywhere as he violently struggles. Gretel, to Abigail's surprise, slaps him soundly and confronts him, freezing him in place.

"Stay still for once. We're putting a tiny, not-so-sharp blade in your back pocket. Once we do that, we'll leave, and you'll have to figure out how to free yourself. Clear?" she asks, a coldness more typical of Abigail than herself.

Mikel vigorously nods, shaking his head so fiercely that Gretel fears he might break his neck, which would be a disaster since their deal would go down the drain. When he settles, Abigail holds him by the shoulders to prevent any sudden movements, and Gretel slips the knife into his pocket.

"Now, we'll be on our way," Abigail says before releasing him. She doesn't finish the sentence as she falls silent, hearing the sound of engines. Despite knowing they were coming, she couldn't help but be surprised, assuming they were farther away. Mikel squirms upon realizing something is happening. He shakes violently, and just as Abigail hits the ground, the Civil Guard turns on their sirens, and two cars materialize like specters. The agents disembark so quickly that Abigail doesn't even have time to fully stand and remains on all fours.

"Stop, Civil Guard!" shouts an agent.

Mikel needs no more prompting; as soon as he hears the shouts, he springs up and attempts to run in the opposite direction of the voices. Not even two meters into his sprint, he collides with Abigail's car and tumbles headfirst into the trunk.

"Get down! Get down!" shout the agents.

Abigail stretches out, lying flat on the ground, and Gretel imitates her by settling next to her.

"Hands behind your back, come on!" yells one of the agents, while two others seize Mikel and drag him toward one of the vehicles.

The two women scream that they haven't done anything, making sure Mikel hears them as loudly as possible. A guard keeps them at gunpoint while they continue shouting until Mikel is loaded into the vehicle and taken away.

Relieved, they breathe; they don't know what will happen next, but shedding the burden of having Mikel with them feels like shedding ten years.

"Get up."

Neither of them noticed the woman approaching, but when they look up, they find what they assume is Sergeant Cruz Ortega facing them. Sergeant Molina, who stayed with the sergeant and aimed at them until a moment ago, lifts Abigail under her arms, helping her stand as she tries to dust sand off her face without hurting her nose.

Gretel rises on her own and stands beside her battle companion, uncertain of what to say.

"Are you alright?" the sergeant asks, surveying them from head to toe, still surprised they managed to keep Mikel at bay.

"I'd feel better on my couch with a bowl of popcorn and a blanket," Abigail quips, exhausted.

"Yeah, I was doing just fine in my house this morning until they woke me up to dump the most absurd case I've ever dealt with."

The sergeant nods toward Sergeant Molina, and he walks away, getting into the car to wait.

"How did you know who I was?" Gretel asks, burning with curiosity.

"Through your husband."

"Through Pol?!" Gretel can't help but be outraged. "How is that possible?"

"Okay, so he exercised his right to worry about you. Since you hadn't come home all night and weren't answering his calls, he decided to head to the station for help. And guess what? Turns out, the sergeant here," she says, pointing at the car, "was right there at the moment. Despite all signs pointing to a voluntary disappearance, when your husband described you, it clicked with the description we had of one of the two women seen at the bar."

"Seriously?" Abigail asks, incredulous.

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"You bet," the sergeant confirms. "See, sometimes cases get all tangled up and stalled, but other times, like in this one, we get a stroke of luck that practically solves everything."

Gretel, still indignant, presses, "You still haven't answered my question. Resembling a woman described to your husband doesn't make me that woman."

"Of course not. But since the lead was there, I had my team check the last places her phone pinged. Want me to continue?"

Gretel's heart stops damn that bar.

"No."

"And what's going to happen to us now?" Abigail asks, suddenly so exhausted she couldn't care less about ending up in a cell; she just wants to lie down and sleep for a few hours.

"You'll accompany me to the station, answer all my questions, and when I'm satisfied, sign the agreement, then head home."

Abigail and Gretel exchange glances, releasing the breath they've been holding.

"Why did you help us?" Abigail needs to know.

"I don't know," the sergeant shrugs. "I guess I trust you. Anyway, by the time I uncovered your identity, my lieutenant had already authorized the agreement. And

after confirming that you," she says, addressing Gretel, "didn't have a single traffic ticket, I decided it would be unfair to tarnish your record just because both of you felt bold last night and made a very bad decision."

The sergeant turns and heads back to her car as they watch, feeling an equal mix of gratitude and admiration for her.

## Chapter 21

Abigail and Gretel emerge from the station well past six in the evening, having endured the endless questions from Sergeant Cruz Ortega and signed the risky agreement. Exhausted and hungry as lions, for the first time in hours, they feel calm, the burden they carried on their backs, named Mikel, lifted.

The two gaze at the sky, closing their eyes as the sun's rays warm their faces.

"I could devour an entire cow," Gretel admits aloud.

"I'll treat you to a feast if you leave me a slice," Abigail replies.

Gretel looks at her and smiles serenely for the first time a broad, pure, sincere smile that makes Abigail sigh.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

A man's voice interrupts her reverie. Gretel's expression morphs from absolute bliss to anger in a split second.

"I'm perfectly fine," she replies, shrugging off her husband Pol's attempt to grab her hand. "What are you doing here, Pol?" she asks, making Abigail swallow uncomfortably.

"What do you mean, 'what am I doing here,' Gretel? You leave home, disappear all night, ignore my calls and messages. I was worried, you know? And who's she?"

Abigail, a businesswoman accustomed to handling any impromptu and tense situation, would have extended a hand to this stranger at any other time, introducing herself with her best smile and defusing the tension, as she's done many times when one of her brothers was ruining a meeting. However, she remains still and paralyzed for the first time in a long while. She doesn't see Pol as a stranger to impress; she sees an enemy, a rival, the only person with the power to pull her away from Gretel, and she's starting to feel intense emotions for this woman. Abigail Luque is more scared than when they discovered the surprise in the trunk, and it's stressing her out.

Gretel's pulse quickens, not in the pleasant, desire-filled way she feels with Abigail, but with anger. Pol's mere presence offends her how can he be so hypocritical to leave her for someone else and show up acting like the best husband in the world? Just yesterday, she was determined not to talk to him for a while, to give herself time to clear her mind and figure out how to proceed from here. But there's Pol, standing in front of her, and she won't have a better chance than this to talk to him. They need to clarify many things, like it or not, they've been together for too many years.

"Give me a second," she asks Pol, though he feels more like it's been an order, as Gretel ignores him and turns toward the stranger.

Abigail senses a ringing in her ears when Gretel looks at her. She'd like to squeeze the bridge of her nose to relieve tension, as she often does, but she can't because it hurts terribly.

"I think it's better if we postpone that meal for another day," she says, lowering her head. "I know I said I didn't want to talk to him, but he's here."

Gretel stops talking and sighs. She feels uneasy in the situation and guilty with

herself. She knows she's forsaking what she wants to do what she must, though she's not sure it's the right thing.

"Sure, no problem," Abigail responds, trying not to show any emotion about it.

That's how they part ways. Despite wanting to approach and hug her, Gretel refrains because Abigail's body language is tense and distant, the opposite of what it's been with her since they met. Gretel walks backward towards Pol, still keeping an eye on Abigail. As they distance themselves, she feels a tearing sensation in her chest, as if something is being ripped away, wondering if that something might be her heart.

Abigail maintains eye contact for a few seconds. She doesn't blink, and if it weren't necessary, she wouldn't breathe either. She wants to talk to her, doesn't want their farewell to be like this after everything they've been through. However, the words seem stuck in her throat, choking her instead of flowing out. Gretel reaches her husband, and before turning her back on Abigail, she raises a hand in farewell. Abigail doesn't respond to the gesture, but just as Gretel turns to leave, she regains her voice.



"My offer still stands if you need it."

Gretel spins around, grinning from ear to ear. Then she raises her hand to bid farewell again, and this time Abigail returns the gesture. Gretel hops into the car with her husband, determined to have a long conversation with him. Abigail gets into her own car, heading to a car wash. Cleaning the trunk thoroughly will help her disconnect from the unease she feels.

### Chapter 22

When Abigail finally arrives home, it's past eight in the evening. She's given her all to cleaning her car, inside and out, except for the front seats where Gretel sat. She doesn't want to lose the last trace she has of her. Getting out of the car, a strong smell of bleach wrinkles her nose, causing her pain.

"Damn," she mutters in disgust, bringing her hand to her face cautiously.

No matter how hard she tries, she can't deny being in a foul mood. All day, she anticipated the moment when she and Gretel could let the flames ignite, those flames that spark whenever they're close. In her ideal scenario, they would have arrived home, taken a shower, poured some glasses of wine, made love on the couch while waiting for a sumptuous dinner from her favorite restaurant. Then, they would have made love again and spent the rest of the night chatting about themselves until they fell asleep.

However, none of that is happening because Gretel left with her husband. Abigail feels more foolish than ever, wondering how she allowed herself to entertain those

thoughts with a woman who, at best, could only have extreme resentment for her husband's prank. She had built illusions, she, a woman so rational and practical, fell victim to what she always swore wouldn't happen to her. She nods resignedly and walks to her bedroom. Though she may not have Gretel, she can still enjoy a soothing bath and that dinner. She grabs clean underwear and pajamas, glancing towards the bed where she and Gretel slept. Opening the wardrobe, she eyes the sets of clean sheets ready for a change, but at the last moment, she shuts the door. She can't do it; the scent of those sheets is all she has left of Gretel right now, and she's not ready to let it go, no matter how challenging it is to comprehend the reason. It's only been forty-eight hours together, yet it feels as if the love of her life has abandoned her. She takes a couple of seconds to take a deep breath and refocus; she's exhausted, both physically and mentally, and perhaps that's influencing her. Tomorrow is another day, she thinks as she heads to the bathroom.

Abigail fills the bathtub to the brim with scalding water, turning her skin red the moment she sheds her clothes and steps in. She likes it this way, the initial sting that lets her body adapt to the temperature, something that relaxes her. The enormous antique tub, her only indulgence for which she didn't mind paying a ridiculous sum, strategically placed near the window. On clear nights, she can gaze at the starry sky. Usually, she pairs this with aromatic candles, a glass of wine, and soft music. Not tonight. She's so furious with herself that she deems herself worthy of this punishment. She slowly sinks until fully submerged, holds for a few seconds, then allows her head to emerge, feeling a bit better. She locks eyes on the window, noticing even the sky has chosen not to accompany her; all she sees is the blackness shrouded by thick clouds, obscuring the luminous spectacle she loves.

The doorbell rings, startling her to the extent that it creates waves in the bathtub, spilling onto the floor and soaking everything. Abigail figures it must be around nine and curses under her breath. It won't be the first Saturday her brother Jairo shows up at this hour, dropping off his niece because he's made plans with a friend. She gets up, even more annoyed than before, wraps herself in a robe without bothering to dry

her long hair, and heads toward the door. The bell rings again just as she's about to open it.

"I've told you a thousand times to let me know first," she begins when she opens the door, but when she sees Gretel on the other side, she falls silent.

"Hello," Gretel greets with extreme shyness. "I'm glad you're here and not at your apartment," relieved to have found her.

"Gretel..." Abigail manages to say once she recovers from the initial surprise.

"I know the afternoon didn't go as we expected, but suddenly, I realized I couldn't move forward without closing the chapter with Pol."

Abigail blinks a couple of times, trying to process what she hears. Gretel swallows hard, unable to tear her gaze away from the glimpse of Abigail's chest the robe exposes. The curve of one of her breasts subtly shines with the lingering dampness, eliciting an impatient sigh from Gretel.

"Finished with Pol?" Abigail asks, a bit disoriented.

"Well, actually, he was the one who ended things with me last night. But yes, I had a long conversation with him to ensure our separation isn't a hassle for either of us. I think I caught you at a bad time," Gretel says, changing the subject, sensing Abigail was expecting someone when she opened the door.

"Bad time?" Abigail repeats, struggling to process that Gretel has indeed just knocked on her door.

"Yeah, I think I'm interrupting something."

Abigail takes a quick look at herself and raises an eyebrow.

"You're not interrupting anything," Abigail finally recovers. "I was just taking a bath. Come in, don't stand there."

Abigail steps aside, shamelessly eyeing Gretel as she passes. Gretel has changed clothes, her hair still damp. She carries her purse and a small duffel bag in her left hand.

"Are you staying the night?" Abigail asks without hesitation.

Gretel blushes to the roots of her hair, looking flustered. Abigail's first hint of a smile emerges, suddenly feeling much better.

"If you haven't changed your mind about the offer, yes. I thought of staying here for a few days until I find a rental apartment. I don't want to be a burden, Abigail. If it bothers you, just say so. My brother lives an hour away; I can go to his place."

Abigail closes the door in response and snatches the duffel bag from Gretel's hand, letting it drop to the floor.

"You can stay as long as you want. I told you. In this house or my apartment. Pick a room or stay with me in mine. You're home."

Abigail suddenly feels a fire coursing through her body. Despite the robe, she's naked underneath, exposed, vulnerable, yet excited. She senses herself getting wet rapidly, and fear starts creeping in.

"In your room?" Gretel repeats, her gaze fixed on Abigail's cleavage.

"Choose that option, but be aware, it comes with consequences," Abigail states, her

dark eyes dilated like deep wells, and Gretel feels her heart thumping urgently between her legs.

"What kind of consequences?" Gretel asks, taking two steps toward Abigail. She stands before her, pulling at the robe's tie.

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The garment opens effortlessly, and Gretel is breathless at the sight of Abigail's naked body. Possessed by the undeniable desire, Gretel raises a trembling hand, caressing a breast before kissing her, using the other to remove the robe. Abigail's heartbeats reverberate almost painfully in the center of her chest. Guiding Gretel to the sofa, Abigail strips off every piece of clothing along the way, settling astride her.

Abigail has played in her mind countless times what she intended to do to Gretel if the chance arose. She wanted to explore her body, with wet kisses and fiery caresses, until her partner begged for release. However, she must alter the order of things because the need surging within her is too much to bear.

"I need you to touch me," she implores in a choked whisper. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"As sure as I wanted to steal that damn car," Gretel replies, slipping her hand between Abigail's legs, causing her vision to blur.

Abigail guides her to touch her in just the right way, and she moans, screams, and pants over Gretel until a wave of heat, extreme pleasure, and delirium wraps around her, not releasing until her body relaxes after the climax. When she catches her breath, she looks at Gretel, smiling mischievously, a smile that assures her lover she'll find it impossible to stay away from Abigail once this is over.

## Chapter 23

Much later

Abigail indulges in a few seconds of stretching in bed. When her muscles loosen, and the joints crack with the stretch, she gets up, takes a quick shower, and hops into her car to head to the office. Twenty minutes later, she parks in her spot, greets the concierge, and instead of pressing the elevator button to the third floor where her office is located, she hits the ground floor button, stepping out into the street as she does every day.

Putting on her sunglasses, she strolls the three blocks to her destination. Upon arrival, she takes them off, resting them on her head. The scent of churros hits her as she opens the shop door, and she inhales, salivating as her stomach growls.

"Good morning, Sergio," she greets Gretel's young assistant, who blushes upon seeing her despite their months-long acquaintance. "Where's my wife hiding?"

"In the pantry," he timidly answers, turning his attention back to the two girls waiting at the counter.

Abigail pushes the door to the back room, places her briefcase on a shelf, and continues to the end of the space. There, she finds Gretel crouched, opening a box of cocoa powder packages. Abigail leans over her, grabs her waist, inviting her to stand while tickling her, and Gretel wriggles in laughter.

"I can't work like this," she complains while still laughing, and Abigail kisses her.

"Of course, you can. In fact, I'm starving," Abigail responds, biting her lip.

"You've got nerve," Gretel continues to laugh.

Abigail gives her a playful spank on the rear, and the two emerge from the pantry. Gretel prepares two cups of hot chocolate and a handful of churros, as they do every day since deciding to open a churro shop three years ago. They've been living together in Abigail's beach house since they got married a couple of years ago, having

previously shared an apartment in the city. When everything is ready, Abigail helps with the cups, and they head back to the pantry, reaching Gretel's office, where they have a table in the corner they use to share this moment every day. Afterward, Abigail will return to work, but without the stress she had before. Since she threatened to leave the company, her brothers have stepped up, and they no longer burden her with as much responsibility as before, at least not as much as they used to.

"Do you know what day it is today?" Gretel asks her wife absentmindedly.

Abigail furrows her brow, alarmed in case she has forgotten an important date. Her prodigious mind focuses on the current date, scanning through data in her head to find nothing significant. It's not Gretel's birthday or their wedding anniversary. She also thinks about the day Gretel proposed, but it doesn't match, and she finds it absurd to waste time on it. If they haven't celebrated it any year, this won't be the first.

"No," she responds, intrigued.

"On a day like today, we were in your bed for the first time, with a guy locked in the storage room of the house and a stolen car in the garage."

Abigail bursts into laughter. It's been a long time since they talked about the incident, let alone bothered to memorize the date. She recalls the first few days after, spent in anxiety, not breathing easy until the news announced a major operation the Civil Guard had been working on for months, resulting in the arrest of one of the most significant drug cartels on the Costa del Sol, including Teodoro Blanco.

"Why are you thinking about that now?" she asks Gretel, who, after dipping a churro in the cup, takes a bite and covers her lips in chocolate.

Abigail leans over the table and kisses her to clean her, a gesture she often repeats on many mornings because her wife can't eat churros without getting messy, one of those absurd details she loves.



"I don't just think about it today; I do it often," Gretel admits, surprising her wife.

"You've never told me anything," Abigail worries, thinking she might have some kind of trauma she hasn't noticed.

"It's not a bad thought. I don't reminisce about the tension we went through that day, which was terrible now that the subject has come up," she admits with a smile. "I think about it every time I realize how much I love you and that if we hadn't dared to do what we did, it's likely you and I wouldn't be together right now."

Abigail looks at her touched, then stands up, circles the table, and sits on Gretel's lap, putting an arm behind her shoulders.

"I'm sure we would be," she asserts, whispering. "You and I are meant to be together, Gretel. And if it wasn't in those circumstances, it would have been in others."

"Do you really believe it?" Gretel questions.

"Of course," Abigail responds.

"Do you ever miss that adrenaline?" Gretel's question slightly unsettles Abigail, who squints her eyes and gives her that mischievous smile that makes her wife sigh.

"Are you suggesting something?" Abigail asks, raising an eyebrow.

Gretel shrugs, and both burst into laughter.