



Bratva Hunter (Bravikov Bratva #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Roric Bravikov has one mission: track down the woman who witnessed his brothers crime. But Rosa Aguilar isnt just any witness-shes on the run from her fathers cartel, seeking protection from the very man sent to hunt her down. As theyre thrust into forced proximity, passion ignites and a forbidden romance blossoms, but secrets and unexpected twists soon pull them into a dangerous game.

With a surprise baby and a relentless pursuit for vengeance, can they find love amid the chaos, or will the shadows of their pasts tear them apart?

Dive into the third standalone novella of the Bratva Series, packed with steamy romance, heart-stopping twists, and a guaranteed HEA.

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ROSA

My friends giggle around me. Four of us just completed a modeling assignment here in Prague. I flip my hair, scanning the dance club. Lights reflect red and blue along the ceiling with other lights strobing around the room. My father would swallow his tongue if he saw the dress I'm wearing. The short silver dress shimmers in the strobing-colored lights. No bra and just a scrap of a thong between me and the dress. It's so low in the back, I feel indecent.

Hands cup my hips, pulling me against a hard, warm body. I can tell he's tall with the aroma of citrus and sandalwood. Leaning the back of my head against his chest, we're writhing to the beat. My friends turn and smile, two offering a thumbs up. He must be gorgeous. They're drooling.

A new song starts before the last one ends, offering a constant beat. Finally, he turns me around to his handsome face. Piercing blue eyes sparkle as a smile lifts the corner of his mouth. He thinks I'm as hot as I think he is. And damn, he is fire. Warm milk chocolate hair with wild light streaks makes my fingers itch to run through it.

He leans in to me. "I'm Rory."

I take a breath. I never use my real name, but my conscience niggles at me, wanting to share it. "Rosa." It's my real name, because it feels like he could mean something.

"Nice to meet you. Want a drink?" I bob my head as he pulls me off the floor, cupping my elbow, leading me to the other end of the bar. Stopping at the edge of the bar, he asks. "What do you like to drink?"

“Bottled water.”

A subtle brow lift from the gorgeous man, makes me smile. He orders my water and a shot of vodka, I assume for himself. He hands me the unopened bottle and walks me and his drink to a side table. The two men standing at the table make eye contact with Rory but quickly scamper away. He oozes power, like the men in my father’s family, but Rory’s power is veiled in a sophistication my father lacks.

He pulls out my chair and grabs the other to pull it close. I can feel the warmth from his body as we sit and my panties dampen. “It’s interesting to find another American in Prague.”

He shrugs. “My family business sends me all over the world, and Prague has the best nightclubs.”

“Yeah? I haven’t been to that many.”

He drops his head to the side of mine, and I can feel his longer hair tickle my ear. “You’re young. Give yourself time to travel and experience the world.”

His scent captivates me as I whisper. “I love to experience new things. Want to be my tour guide?”

His head snaps back to stare. “Don’t tempt me.”

“Why not? You’re the first man I’ve ever wanted to pick up at a club. Take me back to your place and give me some of those experiences you alluded to.”

He stands, yanking me into his arms, slipping me next to his warm body under the protection of his side. “I’m not letting you leave until morning, pretty girl.”

“You growled like it’s a threat. I’m happy to go back with you.”

We exit the club as I take out my phone to text my friends that I’ll call them in the morning. We stop as we reach a silver SUV. “Tell me you’re not a virgin.”

Laughing, I squeeze his upper arm, raising to my tiptoes. “No. Rory. That train left the station a long time ago.” He opens the door as I climb inside.

Pulling into the parking section of the hotel, he maneuvers to valet parking, handing his keys to the attendant as he strolls around to open my door. His large, warm hand extends for me to clasp. “Step into my castle, Princess Rosa.”

I can’t help the blooming smile on my face. My grandfather called me that when I grew up in Texas with my mother’s family, away from the evilness of my father’s life. We walk arm in arm into the hotel, stepping onto the elevator. The doors close and his hands grab me, pulling me to him as he lifts me off the ground to take my mouth with his. The hint of vodka remains on his tongue as he explores my mouth. If I wasn’t hot for the man before, this kiss would do it.

Setting me down as the elevator dings, we step out into the expansive hall with blue and gray carpet and gaudy gold sconces adorning the walls. He shifts his footing to place me next to his side once more. Anticipation bubbles in my core as he walks us down the short hall. It’s a penthouse suite with an ornate double dark wood door. He gets us into his room and before I get a chance to look around, he shoves me against the wall, sliding his hand to my throat and kisses me hard. It’s possession. Nothing I’ve experienced prepared me for the assault on my senses this man is causing. He moans as his tongue dances with mine. It’s glorious.

“Tell me you want this.”

What? “I uh. Yes, damn it. I want this. Give it to me.”

He chuckles. “Is there anything you don’t want me to do to your body?”

What the hell would he want to do? “Huh? What do you mean?”

He releases his hand from my neck and gently strokes my collar bone, kissing my forehead. “What shouldn’t I do to you?”

“What do you want to do?”

The chuckle returns as he scoops me up and struts to the bedroom, standing me against the bed. “Do you want me to fuck you?”

I gasp. “Yes. Oh, yes.”

“Can I be rough?”

“Sure. I trust you won’t hurt me.”

“No, pretty girl. I won’t.”

He reaches around and unhooks the single hook holding my tiny dress on my body. The swath of material falls to the ground, pooling around my slingback heels. Braless, he strokes his hands under and around my breasts. His warm hands cause goosebumps which peak my nipples. Leaning down, he wraps his lips around one and fingers the other. My pussy soaks my panties. “Oh...”

“You’re so responsive.”

“I love what you’re doing.”

“It’s only going to get better from here.”

His thumb grazes the side of my breast as his hand scales down my body. His lips pop off my nipple, and he gathers me into his arms, cradling me, and lying me on the bed. I sigh; the anticipation races my heart.

“Have you ever been tied up, Rosa?”

“What? No.” I giggle. “I’ve read about it.”

He kisses me quickly, then rubs his face along the side of mine, nibbling down my throat as my breath catches. He’s so much more experienced than I even imagined.

“Are you going to tie me up?”

“You sound like you want me to.”

“What would you do to me once you tied me up?”

“I’d make you suck my cock, then I’d fuck you ‘til you couldn’t come anymore before I exploded in you.”

My jaw drops. “Uh. Yes.”

He chuckles as his eyes twinkle. He steps away from the bed and moves to the dresser, which holds his duffel bag. Rummaging around for a moment, he pulls out a strip of condoms. I’m on the pill, but I want a condom every time. He walks back to me with it and a small bundle of red and yellow rope in his hand. He rips off one foil square package and tosses the rest on the bed-side table and reaches out with a hand. “Put your wrists together in front of you.” He drops the single condom next to me on the bed.

My mouth waters, waiting for what’s going to happen next as I put my wrists out like he instructed. The smile he offers makes me feel like I’m a perfect student.

“Good girl.”

“Thank you.”

His pupils look as big as pennies, and his stare bores a hole into my soul. “If I do anything you don’t like, you’re going to say the word ‘red’. If you are unsure about anything, you will say, ‘yellow’.”

“It’s like the stories I read in my books.”

His hands move around mine, flipping and tucking the rope around my wrists. The knots give my hands room to move just enough not to constrict. When he mentioned tying me up, I wondered if I would be afraid, but I’m not. I’m excited.

“You’re doing such a good job, Rosa.”

I should feel guilty giving him my name. I know better. The thought spins around my brain, but I can’t focus on it. What’s going to happen next? How big is his cock? I mean, the man is huge, so he’s got to be so much bigger than the two boys I had sex with before.

Rory stares at my hands. Satisfaction plays on his face, giving me a warm feeling in my chest. He’s happy with me. He wraps his hand around my elbow and pulls me to the bed’s edge, picking me up and setting me on my feet. I smile as he grabs a pillow to drop it on the floor, where he points with one hand as he steadies me with his other. “Kneel.” Falling to my knees, his fingers grasp the button on his slacks. He shoves down his pants and briefs, causing them to pile at his feet. His shoes are off, and I can’t remember him removing them. His perfectly erect cock stands along his taut stomach. It’s bigger than I imagined. I catch his smile as he strokes the back of my head. “Take my cock into your mouth.”

I don't have free hands, so I turn my head and open my mouth as he pushes his cock down and between my lips. His hand continues to rub the back of my head as he holds the shaft at the perfect angle for my mouth. I've never done this, but it seems like the most natural thing to do. I slip my tongue around the head and slurp as he moans. His fingers knead the back of my head as he strokes the bottom of his cock. I wish my hands were free to grab it.

He chuckles. "Stop thinking and suck my cock."

The command makes my pussy cream, and I can't wait to please him again. Bobbing up and down on his hard length, he moans. Satisfaction surrounds my soul. This has nothing to do with my family or my job. This is all me, all Rosa. I find a pace that helps me take him deeper into my mouth. I've watched this on porn, so I get the gist of what should be done, but it's a heady feeling for me to be pleasuring him. He growls and startles me.

"Enough." He pulls me off my knees and tosses me onto the bed. Grabbing the condom, he kneels against my bent legs. With one hand and a quick move, he slides the condom on his massive penis and then slips his finger into my pussy. "You're so damn wet."

I bite my lower lip and nod. "I want you."

"And me, you shall be having." He reminds me of a wild cat, like you see on a documentary. A moment of trepidation skitters across my mind as he moves my bound hands to above my head. "I won't hurt you. Get out of your head and just feel." He parts my knees and lines up his sheathed cock against my pussy.

I move my pelvis to meet his cock.

"Tsk. You stay still."

His sharp words startle me until I look into his lustful eyes. “Yes, sir.”

Chuckling, he uses his massive hand to support me as he plunges his hard cock into my warmth. “You’re so perfect.”

His praise lifts my spirits. I want his praise like I want my next breath. Three quick thrusts and my pussy stretches. He’s so much bigger than anyone else I’ve had. Well, two others, but my inexperience doesn’t seem to make any difference in his bed. He pushes in a little more with every thrust, and my pussy is full. I moan and he smiles. I cry out. “Oh, God.”

“Rory will do.”

My breath catches as my hands ache to wrap around him. The skin chafes along the braids of the rope. My body coils in pleasure, tightening down, needing to explode. Tingles start in my core and spread to the tips of my fingers. I’ve read about this feeling, but words don’t compare to the sensations bombarding my soul.

“You feel so good.” His length keeps the perfect pace in and out. I can’t breathe with the sensations building in my body. My toes curl as my pussy clenches around his rock-hard cock as he pumps in and out, not quite pulling out all the way. It’s as good as the erotica I’ve read. Better because the sensations are real. My hands clench into fists as I scream. The spring that has been coiling snaps, and my body explodes in pleasure. His thrusting continues as my pussy tightens around him while my body plummets off the ecstasy cliff. For my first actual orgasm during sex, it was stupendous. I want that again.

My eyes catch the twinkle in his. He licks his lips and my mind focuses on his words. “Let’s do that again.”

“Mm hm. I’ve never done that before.”

He smiles. "You'll do that every time, as long as my cock is the one pounding you." He thrusts in a few more times before he pulls out. Using his hands, he spins me over and adjusts me up on my knees. "Are you a good girl, Rosa?" His voice is deep, demanding with a touch of gentleness that makes me want to confess every infraction.

The words resonate in my chest. Am I good? His open hand smacks my ass, vibrating my body as he pounds. "Answer me!"

"Yes. But sometimes I'm bad."

He chuckles as he pumps into my pussy. "How bad?"

"Well, I'm here, aren't I?"

"You are here, and I plan to keep you here all night. You feel so good."

The steady bombardment of his hands caressing my body while his cock entertains my pussy leaves me breathless. He's got to be tired. Time has no meaning as my body races to climax again.

His hand smacks my other cheek, bringing me to the present. "Stop thinking and focus on what I'm doing to you."

I want to please him more than I ever imagined. His grunting gets louder, making my pussy clench and my body tingle. The roughness of the bedding rubs my nipples, which is helping to build that feeling again. An orgasm hovers almost close enough to grab it. His hand slips to my hip as he jerks me to his pelvis, increasing his depth. I'm going to come. Two in one night. His hand holds onto my hip, fingers digging in just enough to keep my attention. My heart races as he moans.

“Come for me.” Ecstasy is my new best friend. My pussy ripples around his cock. The orgasm builds as he picks up the pace. He’s close. So am I. So close. “Get there, baby.”

That’s all my body needs. His words of encouragement spur me on. The impact of my climax overrides all my senses. I tumble off the precipice of emotion as he announces his climax. I’ve never felt this content and never been this close to anyone before. My emotions rock me until I chill as he pulls out and walks into the bathroom. The warm and happy feelings that surrounded me are replaced with insecurity. I fall to my side and use my roped hands to pull the sheet over me. Rory comes back with two pieces of cloth in his hand. He shifts the sheet and washes between my legs with a warm cloth. Smiling, he leans to kiss me, then replaces the wet cloth with the dry one. He steps away, and I struggle to catch my breath. What happens now? I feel the blush of embarrassment creep up my neck. I’m not a one-night-stand type of woman.

He comes back into the room and motions for my hands. He brushes his thumbs over the back of my hand as he removes the rope. The rope falls to the bed while he rubs my wrists and hands.

“You did so well.”

I smile. His compliments mean so much more than they should. “Thanks.”

“Tell me about yourself.”

I chew on my lip as I prop the pillow up against the headboard. Is this what you do after a one-night stand? Chat like it’s a date? “Um. I model a little. I love to travel, so modeling gives me an excuse. What do you do?”

“I work for my family’s business. We’re in logistics.”

“Logistics? What does that mean?”

He lies next to me, stretching along the bed. His hand strokes my body underneath the sheet. “My family provides things for what companies need.”

“That sounds ominous.”

He chuckles. “It’s pretty benign, trust me.”

His words make me realize I do. “Where do you live?”

“New York, most of the time, but I travel a lot.”

He shifts the sheet to reveal my sex. “Where do you call home, Rosa?”

“I spend most of my time in Mexico with my mother, but I grew up in Texas.”

He nods. “I think I know enough for now.” He pulls the sheet off my body. The coolness of the room pebbles my nipples as he lands on me, pinning me to the bed. “I’m going to make you come so hard.”

I giggle. “Bring it on.”

Light is just creeping through the curtains of the expansive window. My phone buzzes on the table next to the bed. The beautiful man breathes deeply, sound asleep next to me as my body hums with sore muscles and chafed wrists and ankles from multiple sexcapades during the night. I can’t help but smile as I move into the bathroom and close the door. Whispering, I answer. “Hello?”

“Oh my God, Rosa. Get your ass back to the hotel now. Your father just landed. He’s on his way here, and your bodyguard is going insane trying to find you. Shit, you

can't stroll into the hotel in your dress from last night. What are you going to do?"

"I'm coming. Try to stall for me." I stare at myself in the mirror, feeling more beautiful than I ever have. "Crap." I step out of the bathroom and move to Rory's bag. He's got to have something I can wear. He's fucking huge, but shorts might work. I could look like I was exercising. There's a rubber band on the desk, and I snag it as I find a tight wicking athletic shirt and workout shorts. Scooping up my panties, I leave my dress pooled on the ground with my shoes. Slipping on the panties, shorts and shirt, I glance back at the stud in the bed. I itch to touch him again. Fear drives me out of his room and down the hall to the elevator. Using the key I swiped from his desk, I activate the elevator and pray I can get to the hotel in time. The bodyguard my father sends with me is an addict who passes out every day after my photoshoots. He wouldn't have had any idea I wasn't back if I hadn't slept here.

The elevator dings in the middle of the ride down. A teenage girl, about my size, steps into the elevator. She's wearing a track jacket and shorts and tennis shoes. Opening the phone cover, I slip out the fifty-dollar bill I always carry for emergencies. I hold it out. "I'll pay you fifty for your tennis shoes, socks and jacket."

The girl doesn't even think before she's kicking off her shoes and pulling off her socks. I reach down to get them as she peels off her jacket. Handing her the money, I dress in the elevator. This will make my exercise excuse more legit.

Ten minutes later, I run to the back of my hotel and smile at the cute man in the doorway having a smoke. I point to the door and bat my eyes. His language isn't recognizable, but all men understand a woman's meaning. He turns and motions for me to enter. The freight elevator takes me to the mezzanine level, which houses the gym. A man holds the door as I run inside and get on the treadmill. Let's make this look good.

Voices speak behind me as I turn into the annoyed face of my father. "Why aren't

you in your room getting ready for breakfast?”

I reach for the towel on the rack and blot my face. “I’m sorry. I came to run.”

His brow lifts as his jaw tightens. “I want breakfast. Let’s go.” He picks up my phone and begins to flip through. I know this is what he does, so I deleted any incriminating texts or calls. He harrumphs and hands me my phone as we exit the room. “Hurry up and shower, so you look presentable. You shouldn’t work out. You’re a woman.”

I nod. There isn’t anything I can do and expressing any individual thought will only get me in trouble.

RORIC

My ringing phone wakes me from the deep slumber. I reach for my phone as my other arm extends across the bed. It’s cold. “Hello?” I turn my head to notice the opposite side is empty. A quick glance of the room confirms she’s gone.

“Roric. Come home now.”

“Yes, Papa. I have a ten o’clock flight, so I’ll be at your place by early afternoon.”

He ends the call without a reply. “Prick. He lost all manners after my mother died.” I throw my feet over the side of the bed, noticing the shoes and dress from the night before. My smile creeps up my face and dims as I notice my open duffel. Did she just take my clothes or my money, too? I rummage around. Everything important seems to be here. Why did she take shorts and a t-shirt instead of wearing her dress? I guess she didn’t want to do the walk of shame. If she’d stayed, I would have bought her a new outfit from the boutique in the lobby.

I collect the dress and shoes and toss them in my bag.

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A MONTH LATER

ROSA

The dark, dank New Jersey warehouse smells of mildew and sulfur. Is the stench from something that's died in the building? Rodent droppings pepper the floor, with piles along the walls and in the corners. I can only imagine the diseases spread by the bugs and rats. Anxiety drips off my father like wax melting off a candle, and it raises my discomfort. I've learned to always expect the worst from him. He looks much older than he is, with thinning hair and pudge along his waist. His suit jacket is thrown on the dirty table next to his laptop. We've been standing around the deserted office for the last hour as his men mill around the ground floor of the warehouse.

"You're not going back to your mother's in Mexico. It's time you pay me back for all the money I've spent on you."

"What money?"

"The money I gave your mother for you."

"Mama didn't need your money." I wouldn't even be here if you hadn't taken me from home when my mother was gone. I'd only been home for a few days after my model shoot in Rio.

My father's hand swings out and catches me across the face. It's not the first time he's hit me. He's broken my nose, my wrist and so much more. I lick my split lip. Asshole. The coppery taste is a reminder of how much he hates me. He pulls his arm

back, and I shift my footing so he misses. “Bitch.” I prepare myself for more abuse, but his phone dings, and he opens the door to walk out into the open warehouse. “This isn’t over. The only thing that has any value is your bloodline and your virginity.”

Well, one for two isn’t bad. I peer from the corner and look through the large glass window in the side office. A large man with a scar enters the warehouse. There’s just enough light to see the scene like an old black and white movie. The man carries an aura of authority my father has always wanted but never mastered. He and my father talk across the warehouse floor. I can tell my father is angry, and I can hear them arguing until all hell breaks loose. Bullets fly and bodies fall. If I’m lucky, the beast will kill the asshole.

I peek from my hiding place in the side office. My father approaches the scarred man who ducks behind a shelving unit to lure him. He’s considerably smarter than my father. Not really a surprise, though. My father jumps out as the man shoots him twice in the chest. The man moves in on my father’s lifeless body as two other men rush into the room. Time stands still as I realize I’m standing in an open window witnessing murder. Fear forces me to move as I bend down to notice an open area behind the counter by the window. I shimmy down, pushing myself behind the adjacent cabinet. Just in case they come looking in here.

Time passes and I debate whether to wait longer or head out. It’s time. No one’s coming in here. I notice his computer sitting on the desk. There’s a flash drive sticking out of the USB port on the side. I yank it free and toss it in my purse as I walk out the side door of the warehouse. My father left his keys in his BMW, so I’ll take it and leave. I have to hurry to his penthouse to get my passport and bags. I need to leave New York tonight.

It takes me forty minutes to get back to my father’s place. I use his garage opener to get into the condo garage and park his car. The elevator opens as I get out. Please let

me get into his place and get out fast before anyone realizes he's dead. I take the elevator to the penthouse and use my father's keys to get in. Twenty minutes later, I've collected everything I brought and changed my clothes into casual traveling attire.

My phone rings. "Hello?"

"Rosa?"

"Uncle Arturo?"

He speaks to me in Spanish. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the condo."

He snorts. "Where is your father?"

"I'm not sure."

He clicks his tongue. He's as big an asshole as my father. My mother hates him, too.

"Weren't you with him?"

"He was waiting for someone at the warehouse and told me to return to his condo."

"That's a lie. Your father said he was taking you with him after his meeting."

Shit. "I don't know why he sent me back; you'll have to ask him."

"You and I know that's not possible. You watched him die."

"Uncle Arturo, I don't know anything. I just want to go home."

He blows out his breath as I hold mine. “You witnessed an important man execute your father. You need to wait for Marco to get there.”

Uncle Marco is my father’s oldest brother. Uncle Arturo is my father’s uncle. I’ve never spent any significant amount of time with either, and I don’t trust them. My mother considers them just as evil as my father. “You just want me to wait here?”

“Yes. I’ll protect you from the Russian family of the man who executed your father.”

“Sure. I’ll stay. When will Uncle Marco arrive?”

“He should be there in the morning.”

“Okay.” I end the call and grit my teeth. There is no way I’m staying here to wait for my execution, or worse. I walk to my father’s study and remove the painting that covers his safe. Inhaling a deep breath, I remember the combination. I open the safe to dozens of wrapped money bundles stacked in the front. I reach in and grab the first handful of money, slipping it into my purse. The second stack goes into my carry-on bag and the last set of bundles goes into my backpack. I’ve got enough money to get me to Mexico and avoid the Aguilar cartel.

There’s a file in the safe, marked ‘insurance’. I pull it out. Inside is a dossier on each of my father’s brothers and his uncle. I slip that into my backpack as well. Hoisting my backpack onto my back and grabbing my bag, I walk into the kitchen. I open the drawer and pull out the mallet in the utensils drawer. I set my phone down to beat it on the granite counter. Pieces of glass fly around the kitchen, as I scoop up the pieces and shove them into a Ziplock bag. I’ll drop this in the trash the next time I stop.

I peek out my father’s door into the hall. It’s empty. I move quickly and calmly to the elevator, reminding myself to look like any other resident that’s heading on a trip. The doors open, and I step inside. I get down to the fourteenth floor before the doors

open again. A small, elderly woman walks into the elevator and smiles. “Good evening.”

“Hi.” I just need to make it to the car and leave the garage.

We both smile in silence until she speaks. “I forgot my purse in my car, so I have to trudge all the way down to the garage to get it.”

I offer a soft nod. “I’ve done that.”

Her brow lifts. “You look familiar. Have we met before?”

“I don’t think so. People have told me I have one of those faces.”

“That must be it.” She motions to my bag on my shoulder. “Going on a trip?”

“Yes. I’m visiting a friend in Florida for the next few weeks.”

She beams. “I love Florida. The warm beaches and beautiful sea. I used to live there when my husband and I were newly married.”

The elevator door dings on my garage floor, and we step out. I turn and wave. “It was nice chatting with you.”

“You too, dear.”

An SUV turns the corner and I stiffen. The woman catches my hesitation and points to the large van to her left. I duck behind the van as the SUV stops at my father’s car. She walks to her small sedan next to the van and grabs her purse as I watch her from my hiding area. This is the second time I’ve had to hide tonight.

Two men get out of the SUV and run for the elevator as the third man drives the vehicle back down the lane. The woman peeks around the van and nods at me. “I left the keys to my car on the seat, along with my tablet. When you’re done with my car, I’ll use my tablet’s GPS to find it. I know what it’s like to be afraid of men.”

I’m overwhelmed by her kindness and sneak around the corner to hug her. “Thank you”

She hugs me back. “You’re welcome. Find a good life.”

I whisper. “I’m trying.”

She gets on the elevator as I take the keys off the seat. I put my stuff into the back seat and glance at myself in the rearview mirror. My mind runs through what I have in my bag to disguise myself. I reach into the exterior pocket to grab a scarf. Wrapping it around my head, I drape the ends to cover the edges of my face. I start her car and think about where I can leave it to get to safety but still be easy for her to find.

The SUV with the guy from the cartel sits at the edge of the garage. The guy’s playing on his phone and barely raises his head to look at me as I hold my breath before proceeding through the garage gate. I make the turn out of the garage and breathe. Okay. Where do I go?

The farther I get from Manhattan, the more paranoid I become. They’ll find me and just kill me if I’m lucky. The bag of phone parts reminds me to throw them away. I spot a fast-food restaurant with a large interior eating spot. I’ll throw away the phone and eat something.

Before I walk into the restaurant, I drop my trash in the tubular canister. I use the restroom after I order a chicken sandwich and a drink.

I don't remember the last time I ate fast food. The crispy chicken fills my stomach, and the Coke is just enough caffeine to wake me up. Ten minutes later, I drive into the Queens Village Bus Station parking lot. I park the lady's car and slip the tablet under the seat with the key. Opening my backpack, I select a bundle of money and tuck it under the seat as well. I step out of the driver's seat and rotate my head in all directions as casually as I can. Reaching into the back seat, I haul my stuff out and take a second glance around the lot. Nothing catches my eye, so I head for the lobby of the building and the ticket counter.

"Next?"

I lug my stuff up to the counter, having pulled out cash to buy a ticket to Oregon. I have no intention of going that far west, but it'll throw off the cartel if they track me here. There's a stack of maps for the bus routes across the country, and I grab one. Where can I cross into Mexico to get home?

Few seats remain open on the bus to Corvallis, Oregon. The college girl sitting next to me is rattling on about what it's like to go to Oregon State. I would have loved to go to college, but that was out of the question. Women don't get an education. My asshole father mostly ignored me until I turned fourteen and then told my mother I was old enough to sell. My mother went after him with the pan she was loading in the dishwasher.

"I've been doing all the talking." The pretty girl nudges my arm. "What's your name? And your story?"

"I'm Anne." I'm not. It's my favorite book heroine's name, but it works.

"Hi Anne. I'm Riley."

"Hi Riley."

She leans to shake my hand. “Where do you go to school?”

My mind searches for a plausible answer. “U Dub.”

“Oh, that’s cool. We play them in sports, sometimes. Maybe we’ll run into each other at a football game.”

I plaster a fake smile on my face. I have tons of practice pretending to be happy. “Sure, that’d be great.” I pat her arm. “Time to grab a little catnap.”

“Cool.” She leans back in her seat, and I blow out a breath, holding my bag against me.

I startle myself awake. “Shh. We’re pulling into the bus station.” The woman pats my hand.

I sigh. “Thanks.” Light fills the bus, and I get the first chance to see the various people who are traveling with me. No one has paid any attention to me except Riley. There’s no way she could have any connection to the cartel. We exit the bus as I scan the parking lot for any sign of anything sinister. There won’t be. I have my bag and my backpack, having tucked my purse in my bag. I’ll have to get a different bus ticket and head somewhere else. The lobby is bustling with people going in all different directions. No one seems to notice me at all as I step up to the counter, feeling less anxious.

An older woman smiles. “Where to, hun?”

“Um.” I look through the bus schedule. “Sioux Falls?”

She holds her stare and starts to nod. “We’re running?” Her hand touches her face reminding me that my face is bruised and cut.

Her question startles me. “Um.” I shake my head while I set my cash down. “No.”

“There’s a later bus to Sioux Falls instead, if you want a safe place to update your look.”

“Huh?”

She touches her hair. “My sister-in-law runs a salon nearby. She’s good with things.”

“Can I just walk in? And what would she do?”

“Your hair is so distinctive. You remind me of Snow White with your hair and eyes. Maybe a color change and something to cover the marks?”

She reaches across her area and palms a card. “Here’s her address. She’s next door to a cute boutique as well.”

I lean in. “Why are you doing this?”

She tips her head. “Once, I had a man who hurt me. I needed to get away, and I found sisters to help me. We all need help once in a while.”

I take the card and slip it into my pocket as she hands me my ticket. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, hun.”

I skirt off to the side and find the restroom. The mirror reminds me I look like a battered wife. Finishing in the bathroom, I hike my bags up on my shoulders and proceed out the door. I’ll just have to walk into the lady’s salon. But first, where to get a phone? I asked a security guard where I’d find a convenience store, and I’m heading there now.

The convenience store is dirty and crowded. The linoleum floors are smudged black and gray, hiding the white they should be. I keep my head down, tucking in my scarf. Men mill around the edges of the store, watching people as they go. I select two pay-as-you-go phones and two prepaid credit cards. I'll load these with five hundred dollars each. This way I can rent a hotel room and set up Uber with one of my new burner phones. I move up to the counter and the older clerk pays no attention to me at all. He doesn't look at me as he asks how much I want on the Visas.

I step out and notice Pittsburgh has a small-town feel. It reminds me of Portland, Oregon with the river nearby and the look of the trees as we pulled in. Hopefully, if the cartel finds out about my bus ticket, they'll think I went to Oregon and search there. Across the street, there's an art déco building that catches my eye. I walk into the salon, just down the street from the bus station and cringe as I enter. It's bustling with patrons.

"Hi.

I smile at the receptionist. "The lady at the bus station gave me this card and said to ask for Janelle."

She scrutinizes my face. Embarrassment creeps up my chest with the blush. "Sure. Hold on just one second." She steps away and walks to the area of stylists behind the desk. She's gone for a few moments and brings a lady back with her. The receptionist points at my bags. "You can set them close to the shampoo area and pick them up when you go. Meggie is going to wash your hair."

I follow the cute blonde and stash my bags as she points to a chair next to a sink to wash my hair. I lean my head back into the sink as she sprays the water onto my head. "Your hair is beautiful."

"Thanks. I'm hoping for a change."

She smiles as we finish up. I hold the towel that she wrapped on my head and follow her to a separate cutting station near my bags. “Janelle will be here in a few.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

I walk to my bag and pull out the first of my burner phones and open the package with my little pocketknife my grandfather gave me. I slice the knife into the package and power on the phone. The salon is busy, and no one seemed to notice me when I walked back here.

A stunning black woman with an inverted bob walks toward me. “Hi.” Her smile is genuine as she oozes kindness. “I’m Janelle.”

“Hi. I’m...”

She holds up her hand. “Nope. I don’t think anyone can find you here, but never use your name.”

I nod. “I’m using an alias.”

“Excellent.” She approaches and places her hand under my chin. “I’ve got some makeup to cover that.” She nods at my lip. “Not much we can do about the split.”

“I know. Not my first time, but hopefully my last.”

“You have gorgeous hair. We could put in a color wash that would wear off.”

Shaking my head, I take a breath. “I’d like you to color it. I want to look different. Men are searching for me.”

“I get it.” She picks up a comb and runs it through my long black hair. “Thoughts on

a color?”

I blow out my breath. “Blonde.”

She cocks her head and raises her brow. “Can’t get there today. We can get you to a warm brown.” She touches my shoulder. “You’ll be stunning.”

I chuckle. “You’re stunning. I’ll be okay as a brunette and maybe I’ll have more fun, or at least fewer bruises.”

“Let’s get started.”

Three hours later, I’m eating a sandwich and waiting for the color to finish. Janelle glances through the foils and smiles. “It lifted lighter than I thought. Your virgin hair made it easy. Now, how short?”

I stare at myself in the mirror. I love my hair. The color and the length are me. Tipping my head, I bite my lip. “How short do you think?”

She leads me to the hair washing station. “Let’s get it washed out and colored and see what we’re looking at. You might just need to keep it braided or up to look different.”

An hour later, my hair is virtually the same length as before but the warm brown makes me look completely different. The technician bleached my eyebrows to match my hair color. The makeup she suggested darkened the color of my complexion to give me a tan I’ve never had. When I walk out of the salon, I feel lighter. Maybe I’ll save myself.

After five days and four different cities, I’ve arrived in Denver. The clerk at the B-budget hotel ignores me and takes my prepaid card. She hands it back. “I put a three-hundred-dollar deposit on the card, so I don’t need to take your license.” She looks at

me like she can see through the makeup. It's obvious to me I'm not the first bruised woman she's seen. That's a sad commentary on our society, that seeing a battered woman isn't a surprise to people. I take my stuff to my room and shower. I startle myself in the mirror with the color change of my hair and my brows.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:04 pm

RORIC

My second oldest brother, Thane, strolls into Biggie T's, one of the clubs owned by our bratva, and sits down at my table. It was actually his table. He used to oversee this club. The woman he's fucking used to dance on the stage as Little Red Riding Hood. I snicker. Thane thinks he's so sly.

"Hey?" I raise my head to the server so she'll bring a second glass to join mine with my bottle of vodka. I pour a shot for Thane, and he downs the glass.

He settles into his seat and leans back in his chair. Loud music resonates around the darkened club. Two stripper poles and a platform for the dancers take center stage. He pours himself a second shot as he purses his lips and frowns. "You've got a job to do."

I turn my head from the gorgeous redhead on stage. "What job? I thought you're in trouble with our father."

Thane shrugs. "Papa is pissed at me, but he'll get over it."

I chuckle. "You were an asshole to Cynric's woman. He won't get over that." My oldest brother, Cynric, is the second in command of our father's bratva. "She saved him, you know?"

"Saxon told me." Saxon is our youngest brother and the one who maneuvers all five of us brothers to get along. Thane sighs. "It's my fault he got shot."

I cock my head at my favorite brother. “You can’t control everything. Isabella handled his gun-shot wound, and they’re both settled in a new place.”

The stripper ends her routine on the stage. She’s nowhere near as entertaining as Red, Thane’s girl.

“Isabella’s pissed at me too.”

“No shit. She handles Cynric; she’s got no problem handling you.”

Thane rolls his eyes. “Do you want to hear about the job?”

I don’t, really. The job means it’s time to kill someone. I’m the assassin in our family. I killed my first man at fourteen, the night I wrecked Thane’s first car. “Sure.”

“There’s a witness to Cynric killing Jose Aguilar.”

My head snaps to Thane. “What? How?”

“His daughter was at the warehouse and watched. Her great uncle thinks she’s going to go to the police.”

Why would a cartel family member report a crime? “Why?”

“I spoke with Arturo, Jose’s uncle, and his oldest son, Marco. They aren’t upset about Jose. He planned to take control of the cartel from his uncle and his oldest brother. I got the impression they were about to kill him themselves.”

“And you spent eighteen months with this loyal family. No wonder you came home pissed off.”

Thane smirks. “It’s not the family like we have; that’s for sure.”

My mind processes Thane’s words, and I grit my teeth. “So, I’m supposed to hunt down the girl and kill her?”

“I’m not sure we’re getting the complete story from the Aguilers about Rosa.”

My brow lifts. “Rosa?”

“Yeah.” He slides the file across the table. “Rosa White. Well, that’s her name when she models. She was born Rosa Aguilar.”

I pour my last shot of vodka as I flip through the file. It’s her. Keeping emotion off my face, my heart rate skyrockets. The one-night stand from Prague stares at me from the photo. “She’s gorgeous.” I can’t believe she looks even more like Snow White than she did that night: the dark hair and blue eyes. She didn’t act like the spoiled diva I’m reading in the file. “You want me to kill her?”

He shakes his head. “Just track her down and figure out if she’s a threat to us. If she’s a threat to the Aguilers, find out why.”

I stand and tip my head at my brother. “She’s been on the run for weeks. Any idea where she is or where she’d go?”

“Her mother lives in Mexico, but she’s got friends all around the world. You’re going to get to put those hunting skills to work.”

“Fine.” I roll my eyes at my brother. “The mean old hunter is going to kill Snow White. That’s the new fairy tale.” I head out to my SUV to get in the driver’s side, setting the file folder on the passenger seat. She left after the night of fucking with no note or contact information. I hoped to see her again, but not like this. I’ll call my

father's hacker and see what he's got on Snow White.

Fingers calls me back the next morning. "I can't find Rosa Aguilar."

Strumming my fingers on the file folder, I've memorized the information, but there's so much missing. "Her phone?"

"It's offline. Her social media pages lack anything current, and I'm not finding anything about her with her mother in Mexico."

I grit my teeth. "Did the Aguilars find her?"

"No." Fingers stops typing. "I've hacked them. They found a photo of her in Pittsburgh. She got off a bus. She bought a ticket for Sioux Falls but never got there. I can't find her on any video feed from the bus stations. It's like she's disappeared."

I pull out the pages from the folder and slide them into my shredder. "She's got to know that they have her mother's place covered. Who else would she run to?"

Fingers pauses. "She's a model. She knows people all around the world. I can't find a record of her passport, so she didn't take the usual routes out of the country."

"Okay. Keep checking. I'm heading to Pittsburgh." I end the call and grab my go bag. My drive from Manhattan to Pittsburgh will put me there in six hours. Hopefully, I can track a lead.

I park my SUV outside the bus station in Pittsburgh and walk around the area. The convenience store a few places down from the bus station catches my eye. Stepping in, I see cameras in the corner of the store. I step out and call Fingers. "There are cameras at the Seven-Eleven a block or so away from the station."

“Give me a sec.” The pause gives me a chance to continue looking around. “She bought two phones and some prepaid Visa cards. It’s going to take me a few minutes to glean through all the data and figure out which cards were hers.”

“Great. Let me know where she used those cards. I’m going to stop and eat.”

I finish my lunch as Fingers texts me the locations. She’s been extremely careful about the burner phones, and they aren’t in use now, but she’s Ubered with the cards. I throw money on the counter for my lunch and step out of the restaurant. I’m drawn to the art déco building across the street, its sleek lines and bold design a stark contrast to the surrounding buildings. A debate rages in my brain between driving to Denver and grabbing a flight. I hate the idea of renting an SUV, but stealing one to use has its disadvantages as well. Walking back to my vehicle, I call Fingers. “Hey. I need a flight from here to Denver and find me an SUV I can borrow. One where the owners are away for a couple of weeks.”

“There’s a four-forty-five flight. I booked you. By the time you get to Denver, I’ll have found you an SUV to use.”

“Thanks, Fingers. I’ll need provisions in Denver.”

“I’m texting someone now. The SUV will have what you need. You can leave your stuff in the vehicle at the hotel we usually use, and it will make it home.”

“Fine. Thanks.” Before I go to the airport, I’ll rent a hotel room. So long as the SUV is attached to a hotel visitor, even if there is no one actually staying here, it will be safe until one of the bratva can get here and get my ride. We’ve found Campbell Hotel garages have great security.

The SUV Fingers directed me to in the airport garage in Denver is perfect. Someone stocked the vehicle with the knives, guns, and equipment I prefer. There’s a large

stack of money and a few days' worth of clothes in the bag.

My phone rings; it's my father. "Hello?"

"You're in Denver?"

"Yes. Fingers tracked her here."

Papa pauses. "There's more to this whole thing than the Aguilers want us to know. It's been weeks, and she hasn't gone to law enforcement. My FBI connection hasn't heard of her. We know both our families are always under scrutiny for investigation."

"The more I learn about her, the more I'm sure they want her for some other reason. What's Thane think?"

"He's sure this isn't about her witnessing Cynric. Find her and figure out what they want from her."

"I'm on it." I slide my privacy sunglasses on my face. Cynric invested in a company which makes glasses that limit facial recognition. I pull the SUV out of the garage and head into downtown Denver. She's been here for two weeks. Why hasn't she moved on?

The last time she used a prepaid card was four days ago at a Greek restaurant off seventh. My gut tells me she's not here anymore. I can't wrap my head around why she stayed here for so long. Why hasn't she gone home to family or left the country? I stroll into the Greek restaurant and smile at the young woman hovering around the host desk. "Hi."

She beams at me. "Hi. I haven't seen you in here before."

“I just moved here.”

“Take out or dine in?”

“I’ll dine in if you’ll serve me.” I add just enough charm to get a twinkle from her eyes.

“Sure.” She grabs a menu and walks me to a booth at the back of the place. “Want a drink?”

“I’ll take a Coke.”

She grins. “I’ll be right back.”

It’s late evening, and the place is almost empty. It looks like a typical Greek restaurant with fake statues of Greek gods and Mediterranean plants and photos. The bright yellow wall is overwhelming, but the place smells good.

The server comes back to my table and sets down my drink. “Have you had a chance to look over the menu?”

I motion to the opposite side of the booth. “Can you sit for a second?”

She pivots her head around and my lip raises the moment she decides she will. She sits down. “The gyro is good.”

“Yeah. That and a Greek salad.”

She starts to get up, and I hold out my hand, motioning for her to remain. “What’s your name?”

She leans back. "I'm Nessa."

"Hi, Nessa. I'm Tyler."

"So, you said you just moved here?"

"I did. How 'bout you?"

She shrugs. "I'm from here. My family owns the restaurant."

"Cool." I sip my Coke trying to be charming. "My cousin lives around here. She mentioned your place."

"Oh? What's her name?"

"Rosa." I fake a 'I've got a thought' expression and reach for my phone. I scroll to her photo. "Here."

She nods. "Oh. Anna. Her hair's darker in the pic. She's been here a couple of times. She likes the grilled chicken."

"Rosanna, guess she decided to use her nickname. Was she in tonight?"

She gets up from the booth. "No. It's been three or four days. She mentioned she was staying at a nearby motel."

I feign surprise. "A motel? That's weird. I thought she had a place."

Shrugging, she stands. "I'll put in your order."

I flick through my phone. There's only eight places she's used her card, and she's

only used one of the burners for a total of eleven minutes. She's used Uber a dozen times since she got here. Maybe she's searching for something here in Denver? Could she not know she should be running? The server sets down my food, and I inhale it. It's good. I'm a foodie, and this is nearly the best Greek outside of Greece I've had.

Twenty minutes later, she returns to collect my dishes. "Will you live around here?"

I shrug. "Not sure. I travel a lot, so even if I live nearby, I'll be gone all the time."

She hands me my bill and flicks her head to a man calling to her from the kitchen. I toss down a fifty-dollar bill and head for the door. I would have enjoyed luring her back to her place and having her, but I need to move on.

My phone rings.

"Hello?"

"It's Fingers. She used the card in Santa Fe."

"Seriously? Who the fuck runs away to Santa Fe?"

"They've got great art."

Fingers is amusing with his thought process. "Yes, Fingers. Could it be that she doesn't realize she's being hunted?"

He sputters. "Then why did she leave New York in disguise?"

"Maybe she did something and didn't want to be caught?"

Fingers stops typing. "Lemme do a little digging. If she took something that might

explain why they want to find her.”

“Do that. I’m driving to Santa Fe.”

“Shouldn’t you sleep?”

I scoff. “Thanks, mom. I slept on the plane, but I appreciate your concern.” I end the call and hustle to the SUV, clicking on my map app to see that it takes five and a half hours, probably less being so late. How fast can I get there?

Old school classic rock blasts through my speakers. My map app notifies me if cops wait for me on my route. I don’t really care. I’m using my fake California driver’s license, so if they pull me over and give me a ticket, I’ll never get caught. There’s no way anyone has reported the SUV missing. I just need a plausible excuse as to why I have Ken Waterman’s Lincoln Navigator.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:04 pm

FOUR DAYS BEFORE

ROSA

I step off the elevator onto my hotel floor in Denver. My room door is cracked open and my heart stops. I scramble to scan the hallway, looking for someone from my father's life. My lighter brown hair is twisted into two braids falling down my chest. No one could possibly recognize me. My stuff is in my room. I foolishly left my duffel with the extra cash among my clothes on the bed. I've got my backpack on my shoulder with two grand or so in cash and the papers I grabbed with the cash from my father's safe. How can I hide and still watch? I glance to the row of doors in the hall as my mind searches for an idea. The maid comes out of a room and back to her housekeeping cart as I smile, rushing toward her. "Oh, Thank God. I dropped my key at the front desk, and I need a shower." I point to the door down the hall from my room as I duck my head. "I um, you know, started." Women have sympathy for other women when they have their period. She'll pity me and let me into the room to shower. Though I'm just going to kill some time in there.

She opens the door. "I'll come back in twenty minutes."

I swing my backpack off my shoulder. "Thank you."

She nods as I step inside the room as she closes the door. I run to the phone on the bedside stand.

"Hello?"

I lower my voice and speak in a heavy Hispanic accent. “Hi. I was on the fourth floor, and I saw men enter room four eighteen without a key. I’m just afraid they could hurt somebody.”

“Thank you.”

I run to the peephole. Whoever you are, can you stay in my room long enough for security to arrive? Three minutes later, two large men with guns run onto the floor and barge through my hotel room door across the hall. I crack the door to listen. A scuffle in the room and a gunshot.

“Shit.” I didn’t want that. A Latino man rushes by me, not noticing me standing inside behind the cracked door.

More men enter the hallway, and I pull the door open to step out. I want what’s in my room. Taking a big breath, I walk into my room as the man closest to me points his gun.

“Oh!”

“Sorry, ma’am. Is this your room?”

“Yes. What’s going on?” I glance at the dead man on the floor and scream. My duffel sits atop the bed, with my stuff haphazardly sticking out. “That’s my bag.” I point to the man. “Was he robbing me?”

The man with security on his shirt nods. “Yes. Someone called it in.”

“Oh, that’s so kind. I’ll have to thank them.”

Two men in dark suits enter my room and announce themselves as detectives. I move

to the side of the room. The first detective with dark brown hair and a receding hairline nods to the men and then looks at me. “Is this your room?”

“Yes.” I lift up my takeout bag. “I was picking up takeout.” How the hell did they get here so fast? Questions swirl in my mind about how the cartel could have cops on their payroll.

He nods. “Can you scan the room and tell me if anything is missing?”

“Um.” I move to the bathroom and come back out. “The bathroom looks like I left it.” I glance across the room and settle my eyes on my duffel. “Can I look through the duffel?”

The second detective with a paunch belly nods. “Try not to touch too much.”

It’s my bag. My prints are all over my stuff. I feel two bundles of money in the bottom. Shit. How the hell am I going to explain the money? My mind searches for an explanation as I turn to face the officer. “The money I brought to buy my car once I get settled is still in the bottom of my bag. So, they either didn’t find it or that wasn’t what they wanted.”

He nods. “How much money?”

“There’s probably ten grand. My grandfather gave it to me to find an apartment and buy a car. I’m planning to start school in January at UC Boulder.”

He nods. “We’re going to need to take photos of everything.”

I nod. “Of course. I assume I can have the money back when you’re done.”

His nod isn’t very convincing, and my heart sinks. He points to the dead man on the

ground. “Do you know him?”

I don’t recognize the man. He’s the typical cliché biker guy with a leather jacket. I steady my breathing and look confused at the detective. “No.”

He purses his lips as the first detective approaches and speaks. “Someone shot him.”

The burly hotel security guy clears his throat. “I shot him. He had a knife.”

I wait for one of them to mention the other guy who ran down the hall, but the three guys remain silent. The guy who admitted to shooting him puts his phone to his ear and answers, “okay.” He puts his phone back into his pocket. “Just so you know, my boss said the cameras weren’t working on this floor.”

“Well, shit.” The first detective nods at me. “You don’t know him?”

“No. I was out getting my food.” I raise my takeout bag. “I got to the floor after everything had happened.”

The security guys nod in agreement. I guess they aren’t going to mention that I was in another room on this floor before they got here. Huh. Maybe the cameras really aren’t working.

“Did anyone know you had the money in your bag?”

I shake my head and scrunch my forehead. “I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Well.” He blows out his breath and speaks to the burly security guy. “She’ll need a different room, because this one is a crime scene.”

His partner holds up a plastic bag with a handgun and another with a knife. “You

guys need to come in and give a formal statement, but I don't think the city attorney will want to press charges." He casts his head around the room. "It would be nice if he'd left us a clue about why he was here."

I shrug. "I'm just glad I wasn't here."

The first detective walks the men out of my room as his partner stands by the door. "I'm waiting for the manager to come and move you to a different room."

"I'm glad. I wouldn't want to stay here." Shuddering, I think about where I'm going next. I won't be staying here after I get myself and the stuff moved to the next room.

Five minutes later, a short, older Hispanic woman rushes into the hall. "I'm sorry. I'm Ms. Mankin. Let's get you to a new room." She moves her head to look into the room as the officer flicks his hand like he would for a fly. We head out the door with my stuff and trudge down the hall to the elevator. "I moved you to the first floor, closer to the front desk. This way, I'll be able to keep a better eye on you. I can't believe your family let you travel alone. How old are you, anyway?"

If she only knew the truth. "I'm old enough."

Her smirk brings me to the realization that she probably does. "Who are you running from?"

I can't help the tears slipping down my cheek. "No one."

She stops and cocks her head. "I know what that looks like. I did it once myself. Brought me to my future."

My eyes drop to the floor. I'm unwilling to give her more with my face full of emotion. "I'm fine. Really." Who am I trying to convince?

We step off the elevator, and she opens the door, handing me the keycard. “Stop by the office after you get settled. I have a gift for you.” She winks. “I can help you if you let me.”

I lug my stuff into the room. The room looks just like the one I left, but the window looks out into the parking lot behind the motel. The wall art is a fabric montage of various shapes, each a slightly different shade of burgundy. Grabbing my bag, I carry it to the bathroom. Shower first, then figure out the rest.

The water cascades over my body, offering me a brief respite from my forced ordeal. A sob escapes as my hand covers my mouth. Where the hell am I supposed to go? What if the man was working with someone? Scenarios play through my brain like trailers at the theater, giving me glimpses of future torture and death. I grit my teeth as I step out of the shower and dry off.

Now out of the bathroom, I’m fully dressed to run again. The double bed beckons me like a gentle lover enticing me to rest. Taking a deep breath, I hoist my duffle on my back and my bag on my shoulder as I scan the hall through the peephole. The hall is empty, so I extend my head out to look both directions. The lobby sign glows to my left, and I pad to the reception desk looking for the lady.

“Well, hello.”

The woman stands at the edge of the counter with a large envelope in her hand. She motions for me to come to her. I glance around, waiting for the hairs on my neck to stand. She doesn’t seem like a threat. Moving to the end of the counter, she hands me the envelope.

“There’s a prepaid credit card in the envelope.”

My forehead furrows. “Why are you helping me?”

She whispers. "I told you. I ran and someone helped me. I'm paying it forward. You'll do the same when you find your happily ever after." A car door out in front of the motel startles me as her hand pats my arm. "That's nothing."

"Thank you for this." I survey my surroundings, feeling very exposed. "I think I should go. That man could have others coming here."

She nods. "I figured as much. When I saw you step out of your room, I placed a call. The taxi should pull up to the back door in five minutes. Remember, don't trust anyone and always have a go bag and an exit strategy."

I laugh with a sob. "That's how I got here."

Her smile deepens. "You'll find your way."

"Thank you." Holding up the envelope, I move to station myself at the window by the back door. "Thank you for this, too."

"You're welcome. Find your happy future and your prince."

The taxi angles to the back door. I push it open and search the area for threats. I'm out in the open where a man has already tried to kill me. Rushing for the back door, I fling my bags inside, huddling low as I pull the door.

A woman's gruff voice asks. "Where to?"

A sigh slams out of me. "I don't know."

"Do you have a destination? Family to run to?"

Her question gives me pause. She knows I'm running. The manager must have told

her. I lick my lips, remembering I didn't get to eat my food. "Is there somewhere safe to eat?"

"Sure, princess. I know just where to go."

Twenty minutes later, we pull into a cantina in Madrid, New Mexico. The driver parks the car under an awning and points to my bags. "We'll put those in the trunk."

My head pivots, looking for threats. "You can just park here?"

She beams. "Sure, my brother owns it. You're perfectly safe here."

I glance in the direction of the front door, and she shakes her head. "There's a table we can use in the kitchen. Get you fed and figure out your next move."

Air rushes out of my lungs as we walk. I'm overwhelmed by the kindness of the two women. "Thank you."

She pats my arm. "We've been there."

"That's what the motel manager said."

"Want to tell me why you're running?"

Swinging my head back and forth, I chew on my lip. "No. I'm running from bad people, and they're searching for me. I saw something..."

"Say no more, doll." She pushes open the door as scents of well-spiced meats on the grill overpower my senses. A stew bubbles in a pot with spicy smells percolating into the air. My stomach growls on cue as the cook turns around. "Hi, Marcel. She's starving."

His eyes move up my body. “Too skinny. Gumbo, cheese sticks, chicken wings, and a milkshake.”

I smirk. Everyone thinks I’m younger than I am. I’ve been drinking alcohol since my first modeling job at twelve. As much as I would like to argue, a milkshake seems divine. The taxi driver motions for us to sit. She nods. “How long have you been running?”

I shrug. I appreciate her taking me away from Santa Fe, but I don’t want to answer any questions.

She gets up and walks to the drink nook and pours me a large glass of water. She drops a lemon wedge in the glass and walks it to the table. “His milkshakes are delicious, but you’ll want water.”

I pick up the glass and take a long drink. How did I get myself into this situation? I hope my father is burning in hell. My eyes flick about the area. It’s very clean and there’s a bulletin board full of fliers about positive thinking, helpful resources, and side jobs.

“My brother used to be a pastor. He still is, if you think about it. He helps people.” She smiles at the bartender who brings her an amber beverage in a short glass with ice. She raises it. “Only one.”

I nod. “Whiskey or scotch?”

“Whiskey on the rocks. My dad used to drink it.” I inadvertently cringe as she offers a knowing smile. “Is your dad the one chasing you?”

Shaking my head, I smile at the cook, who hands me the vanilla milkshake. “Your food will be here in two shakes of a bunny’s tail.”

My brow raises as the taxi driver beams. “He’s such a hoot. Always got one of those sayings to share.” She leans in. “Half the time I have no idea what they mean, but they’re funny coming out of that large man’s mouth.” She cackles. “A bunny’s tail.”

A few minutes later, I’m gorging myself on tasty food and drinking my milkshake. The taxi driver finishes her whiskey. Here it comes... “Where are you planning to go?”

I shrug. I really don’t know. Twisting my hands, I just want to get back to my mom in Mexico, but it’s not safe. I have grandparents in Texas, but my dad’s family will be watching. “Not sure. I don’t have anywhere to go that they won’t find me. So, I’m just running.” My stomach settles as I eat the food. Who knows when I’ll get to eat something this flavorful again? I turn my head to the kitchen. “He’s a really good cook.”

She nods. “Cajun. He went to some fancy cooking school, but dropped out and ended up here. Lots of people end up here.” She takes a bite from her burger. “I’m Julie.”

I stare at the woman. What the hell do I tell her my name is? “Umm.”

She smiles. “You look like a runaway princess, let’s call you ‘Amira’. It’s Arabic for princess.” The corners of her lips lift. “Fits you.”

I stand to take our dishes to the kitchen as the cook smiles. “I’ll get those.”

“Nah. You made the food, I’ll clean up.”

He cocks his head. “Want to waitress here?”

My hands stop as I’m setting the plates in the sink “What?”

“No one will think to look for you here.” His face softens. “You can make a little money and rest a little. I guess you’ve been running for a little while.”

I nod. “But the owner?”

“Ha. He’ll be fine with it. He’s the worst at bringing in strays. He’s got a room upstairs you can have while you’re here. And when you’re ready to go, Julie will come back and take you to your next destination.”

For the first time since my father died, I feel relief. I could stay. Julie’s head is bobbing in agreement as a very large bald man enters the kitchen. His brows lift as he scrutinizes me before he sees Julie. “Julie.” He walks to her and plucks her out of her seat, pulling her into his arms, and spins her around. “Why didn’t you say you were coming?” He sets her down and all eyes revert to me.

“I have a fare.”

He extends his hand to me, and I shake it. “Hi. I’m Jefferson, I own the tavern. And you are?”

I jerk my head to Julie who smiles. “This is Amira. Marcel just hired her.”

Jefferson pivots his head to his cook. “Oh?”

“Yeah. She needs a job and a place to stay for a while. I like her.”

He scoffs. “Well, okay.” His head cocks in my direction. “Come on, I’ll show you the room upstairs.”

Julie starts to walk out the door, calling over her shoulder. “I’ll get the princess her stuff.”

Great, just what I need, another person calling me princess. Jefferson is through the side door and halfway up the stairs before I get my feet moving to follow. The narrow stairs break onto a landing with three rooms. He points. “That’s my room. That’s Marcel’s room and...” He opens the door to the farthest room down the hall. Entering, throwing his arm out with a flourish. “This is yours.”

I step inside. The room is tastefully decorated in warm blues and grays. The honey oak furniture is antique, with general nicks and scars, but homey. A queen-size bed calls out to me.

Julie enters the room with all my bags, and he smiles at his sister. “There’s a bathroom with a tub and a shower. You look like you could use a bath.”

Julie sets the bags on the dresser. “I’m heading back to Santa Fe.” She kisses her brother’s cheek. “They’ll take good care of you.” She hands me a business card with her name and a number. “If you need anything, call.” I don’t get to answer, and she’s gone.

Jefferson moves to the door, following Julie. “Get settled. We’ll talk about what you can do here at the tavern in the early afternoon. Tomorrow is our late-opening day.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:04 pm

RORIC

I get off the interstate and drive toward downtown Santa Fe. The hotel is a smaller, independently owned building off the hustle and bustle of Main Street. Tall pine trees surround the little adobe building. The front of the hotel faces the street, and the back is hidden by the wings of the four-story hotel, with a door in the center that most likely leads to the lobby. Hitting the call button, Fingers answers. "Hello, Roric."

"Hey. Whatcha' got?"

"She was at the Pinion Hotel in Santa Fe, but the cops reported that she's gone. There was a shooting."

"What? What the fuck?"

"Some guy entered her room and hotel security shot him. She wasn't in the room, but came in after. She got a different room and then disappeared."

"Who was the shooter?"

"I'm looking into that. He looks like a biker. His patch on the back of his jacket reads 'Las Vegas,' and there's some kind of skull.

"How'd you know it was her?"

"I've got an open internet search that pulls anything that could be about her. The detectives included her description. Not many small women have bikers break into

their rooms.”

“Find out who he is, and who he’s working for.” I blow out the breath I’ve been holding. “How the hell did she disappear, Fingers? Hotels are covered in cameras.”

“It appears the cameras weren’t working in the lobby and some exterior areas. They turn on and off regularly.”

I sigh. “Someone helped her escape?”

“That’s my guess. The cops focused on the dead shooter, and let her go without questions.”

“Okay. Any leads on where she went?”

“No. She’s gone.”

I slam my fists on the steering wheel, studying the navigation on the dash. “Fuck. I’ll go see what I can find out.”

“Sounds good man. I’ll keep looking.”

After a drive, I park the SUV and step out, scanning the parking lot for people and cameras. Stepping through the door, the reception area is just to my right. There’s an older woman standing behind the counter typing on a computer. Movement catches my eye. Kids and parents scramble around the small room off to the side. It’s breakfast and my stomach growls on cue.

The woman lifts her head and smiles. It’s not a very convincing smile. Either she doesn’t like people or something about me makes her leery. “Good morning.”

I bust out my best smile, adding a twinkle to my eyes. “Hi. I’d like a room.”

She nods. “It’s a bit early for check-in.”

It’s time to charm the woman and get a room along with information. I saunter closer to where she is standing behind the counter. “I’ll pay extra. The road has made me bone-deep tired, been traveling.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’ll just need a room until tomorrow morning, but I’ll pay for two days.”

She gestures with her hand. “No worries, we’ve got the room.”

A man approaches from the elevator and slams his keycard on the counter. “I should get a free room after the shooting. Fucking ridiculous.”

She frowns. “I’m sorry. We can’t be held responsible for things out of our control. The perpetrator was handled before he could hurt anyone. Our security is top-notch.”

“Ha. Whatever. Going to blast you on the reviews.” He storms off, giving me the segue into asking some questions.

I whisper. “A shooting?”

She sighs. “Yes. Please don’t go. It’s never happened before, and only the shooter was hurt. Well killed.”

I lean against the desk. “Was he after someone?”

She stiffens and licks her lips. “He stumbled into the wrong room. No one was hurt.”

I look around like I'll tell her a secret. "I'm sorry the guy gave you a hard time. The only person who deserves a free room is the occupant of the room he went into."

She nods, her smile lifting. "Yes. Right. She was so scared, poor little thing, and who could blame her."

"Did your security people figure out where he was intending to be?"

Shaking her head, she moves up to type on the computer. "No, and the girl left a few days ago, so it's over now."

Damn. Turn on the charm. "I hope she went to a place full of fun distractions. Something like this can affect you long term."

"Not sure where she went." She turns her focus to the computer and the fake I.D. I handed her.

I take out my phone to text Fingers and see if he's accessed the hotel computer system.

"Here's your identification, Mr. Reynolds. We need a credit card on file."

Handing her a card to match my fake I.D., I lean against the counter and glance around. Worn carpet, old drapes, and cracked tile let me know this used to be a nice hotel. It's the type of hotel that national chains absorb to get a foothold in a particular area.

She smiles as she hands me my card and the keycard to my room. "Breakfast starts at six and ends at nine in the morning, just across the lobby."

I nod and lug my bags to the elevator, ready to put the day behind me.

The next morning, I stretch as I get out of bed to head to the shower. I wasn't lying. I needed sleep. Downstairs in the lobby, people bounce around the food area putting various items on plates. Chattering children and their parents trying to corral them like feral cats annoy me. I just want to get some food, find out if anyone has seen Rosa, and get the hell back on the road.

The couple next to me with two of the more obnoxious children chat about the shooting. I sit down with my plate of food, listening.

"Have you seen the woman they were talking about?"

The woman answers. "No. The lady at the desk said she left. Who could blame her? Could you imagine having some random person with a gun in your hotel room?"

The man nods. "I chatted with the dark-haired security guy who shot the guy. He said he had a knife and a gun." Shuddering, he continues repeating what he was told. "He thinks he was after the girl. The video system was down in the hotel, so they didn't see the guy in advance. Someone reported the man."

She scoffs. "I saw the girl. She was sweet. Jasmine ran into her in the hallway, and she was so kind to her: reassuring her it was okay."

The man leans back in his chair while he tilts his head. "Bad things happen to good people all the time, baby. I'm sure she's moved on to better times."

It takes me just a few minutes to finish my breakfast. Throwing away my plate, I saunter by the room marked security and dial Fingers.

"Hello?"

"Did you hack the system?" I scan the area for anyone to hear.

“Yeah. Nothing. The cameras were down for about fifteen minutes. I can’t tell why. I suspect someone blocked them.”

“Thanks.” I hang up my phone and head back to my room to pack. If the cameras were blocked, then whoever was after the girl knew what he was doing and/or he had help.

It’s late afternoon as I pull into my father’s estate and crack my neck. It’s been a long week. The little waif has disappeared. Fingers can’t find a digital trace, and I can’t find her trail. Stepping into my father’s foyer, I nod at the soldier standing to the left of his office door. Another new face I don’t recognize. He moves to stop me until he catches my stare. I learned how to put underlings in their place with a look by the master. Speaking of the devil, he walks through the door as I’m reaching for the knob.

“Roric?” He looks around me. “You’re back?”

“Yeah. Can’t find her.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “The hunter can’t find his prey. That’s unusual for you.”

“Don’t I know it.” We step back into his study and each grab a seat. “Fucking pisses me off that I can’t find her.”

My father, the Bravikov Pakhan, folds his arms over his chest. “She’ll turn up. I’m curious who was there to kill her, though.”

“That intrigues me as well.”

My father chuckles. “I’m just as glad to have you home. Family business needs you.”

I can only imagine what I'm needed for. "Should I go see Cynric?"

His face hardens as he picks up his phone on the desk. "I'm texting you an address. I need you to train a new soldier."

"So, I'm babysitting?"

He growls. "You're doing what I fucking tell you."

"Yes, Papa. I didn't mean to disrespect."

He waves his hand at me. "Go in the morning."

I stand from the dismissal. I know better than to show my feelings to my father. He's hard... but fair. He loved my mother and treats those in the bratva fairly. My mind drifts to Rosa. Did whoever sent the shooter track her down, or is she just that good hiding out?

I've been working with Johnny, a putz my father invited to join the Bravikov Bratva three weeks before. He's hopeless. He was hired to take on some of my smaller jobs and give me time to work on more lucrative contracts. Contracts. I chuckle. Papa has an assassination list acquired from other criminal organizations. Other leaders pay him to fix their problems. Nine out of ten times, it's someone they want murdered. My specialty. Assassinations provide an effective way to make ourselves indispensable to other organizations. Not to mention the skeletons we can dig up, so to speak, when we need to hold things over the heads of another group. I chuckle to myself. Who knew I'd be the Jay-Z of murder?

My phone rings as I drive back to my father's estate. "Hello?"

"She's running again."

“Hello, Fingers. Where?”

“She’s been outside of Albuquerque for a while. Someone tracked her down and tried to kill her again.”

I blow out a big breath. “It’s got to be the cartel. I just don’t get why they want to kill their kin.”

“I can’t explain it either, but they’ve been on the phone with Cynric and your father.”

“Text me what you’ve got. I’ll head back to the area in a couple hours.”

Eight hours later, I’m driving into the asphalt parking lot of the establishment our girl ran from. I step out of my stolen SUV and strut across the parking lot. There is minimal activity, but I need to stay on my game and scan my surroundings. Pushing open the two wood doors, my nose is bombarded with the smell of Cajun. My mouth waters, reminding me that I haven’t eaten in a long time. The restaurant looks like an old barn with homey, country touches spread around. A massive mirror sits behind the counter with bottles of liquor reflecting the light. On the far end of the long counter, a large glass lighted container shows off various baked goods. I’m taking in the eclectic décor with hard metal surrounded by country charm as a sweet voice welcomes me.

“Good evening. Dinner or the bar?”

My eyes scan to the direction of her hand pointing to a doorway leading into a large dark room.

“This is the restaurant. Good food and bright lighting. That door is the passage to the dark.” She giggles. “Seriously, it’s the bar. They’re open until two, and we close at nine.”

I flick my watch. It's twenty minutes to nine. I grab a seat at the bar. "What's the spectacular Cajun dish I smell?"

Her eyes light up. "Oh, that's jambalaya."

"I'll take a bowl of that, a cup of coffee – black, and a slice of the berry pie in the container."

She beams. "Well, aren't you sweet, choosing items I already have in hand rather than have to make. Coming right up."

Boisterous noises in the bar area catch my attention as she walks back with my coffee. "Do you get a lot of trouble 'round here?"

She shakes her head, then stops. "Not usually." She leans down to whisper. "We had an incident the other day with some bikers. They roughed up our owner and scared the bejesus out of the rest of us."

I sip my coffee. "That's awful. Does that mean they'll be coming around again?" I turn my head back and forth with a concerned look.

"I don't think so. The server they were looking for isn't here anymore." She clicks her tongue. "Poor little thing. She's got some nasty boyfriend chasing her or something. I guess he hired the biker guys to find her. She barely got away." She moves away to head around the counter and into the kitchen. After a few more sips of coffee, she and a man, wearing a long white apron, step out of the kitchen. The man's jaw is tight as he wipes his hands on his partially clean apron.

"You nosy or something?"

I pretend to startle from his question as I shake my head. My long sleeves cover my

tattoos. No one would suspect I was anything but a traveling businessman. “Me? Oh, no. Just asked about the ruckus in the bar next door and the server shared that you had some issues with bikers.” I lean in. “I stay away from bikers.”

He crosses his arms across his chest as the server sets down a large bowl of brown liquid with vegetables and meat. Nodding, he flicks his head to the bar. “They’re trouble. You’d be wise to stay away.”

I dive my spoon into the aromatic dish and scoop out a bite. Nodding before I take the spoon between my lips. “Oh. This is divine. Reminds me of Mulate’s in N’orlens.”

His mouth shifts into a slow smile. “You’ve been to N’orlens?”

“Yes. Sir. Spent a few years in the Navy there. Loved it, but couldn’t work out enough to keep trim. I love my Cajun!”

The man beams from the compliment as he skips off while I devour my food. The server sets down my pie. “Forgive Marcel, he’s crusty.”

“He’s the chef?”

She waves her hand with a huge smile. “Oh, he’d love that. Yeah. He’s the cook. Been here forever. He and the owner go way back.”

I taste the first bite of berry pie and relish the sweet explosion in my mouth. “This is good.”

“Yeah? The waitress who left taught me how to make them. Never would have thought someone who looked like a supermodel would be such a dynamo in the kitchen.”

I nod. “Supermodel?”

“Yeah. She looks like a fairytale princess, and she’s got a hunter, get it? Like Sleeping Beauty.”

“You mean Snow White.”

She chuckles as she walks to get the pot to refill my coffee. “I’ll miss her.”

“Won’t she be back? I mean, the boyfriend will realize she’s not his anymore and give up.”

“No.” Her smile dims. “She wanted to get back to Mexico with her family, but was afraid they’d track her down. I asked her why his whole family was involved in tracking her down, and she didn’t have an answer.” She shrugs.

“You seemed to like her well enough.”

“Oh, I did. Everyone loves her. She’s a princess.”

“Do you know where she decided to go?”

The server leans against the counter. “She said maybe she’d stopover in Phoenix and stay with an old friend.”

I smile at the server as I toss down a hundred-dollar bill. “Thank you for your excellent service.” Glancing at my watch, it’s just in time for her to close. Strolling to my SUV, I call Fingers. Not waiting for him to respond when answering. I blurt out. “Phoenix. Who does she know in Phoenix?”

Fingers clicks away on the other end of the call. I can imagine he’s got his tongue

leaning out of his mouth to one side as he studies his screen. “A model friend.”

“I need the info and a flight now. Charter me one if necessary. Heading to Albuquerque now.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:04 pm

THREE DAYS BEFORE

ROSA

“Hey!”

Why do men think ‘hey’ is an appropriate way to get a woman’s attention? I flick my hand and smile at Marcel, the cook.

“Men are pigs.”

Chuckling, I cock my head. “You’re a man.”

“Eh. I don’t count, chère. I’m Cajun.”

Sure, whatever that means. I guess chère must mean sweetheart or honey. It’s nice, and that’s all that matters. He and my taxi driver’s brother, Jefferson, have been so great for the past few weeks. My uncle’s cartel continues to snoop around my grandparents in Dallas. My mom went back, and I risked a call to her the day before. I really want to go home, but I like it here. It’s a sweet little town. The apartment above the restaurant and bar means I don’t have to go far. I feel safe. Jefferson concocted a story that I was his niece from California. Not that I really engage with anyone to talk about myself, but the regulars noticed there was someone new.

“Hey?”

Turning, I glare at the older bald man with wandering hands. “Hold your horses.”

“Be careful little girl, or you’ll be riding my pony.”

Ew. Seriously. Rolling my eyes, Jefferson moves toward the man. He’s a regular at the restaurant and gets kicked out regularly from the bar next door.

“Ernie. Shut the hell up.”

The old man laughs. “I’m just kidding. I was hoping to make the pretty little one here laugh.”

I step back to the table with a glass of ice water to place before him. “Want me to smile? Treat me with respect and kindness.” I stare down at him with a sour look. “Honey is so much more productive than vinegar.”

I approach the counter and smile at Marcel, who’s chatting with Jefferson. “You’ve decided to stay, no?”

Have I? I’ve been here for more than three weeks, and it’s starting to feel familiar. Safety isn’t something I’ve been used to, but this is heaven. Everyone treats me with respect. Well, except the few assholes that come in.

Jefferson hands me an envelope. I peel back the top to expose cash. Flipping through, I count almost a thousand dollars for the week. He’s paying me under the table, so no one can track it. I work more than the usual forty hours. No one seems to mind, and Jefferson is paying me really well. I work all day and go to bed late, but I’m tired enough that I sleep for the first time since my father took me to New York. Holding up the envelope, I nod at him. “Thanks.”

“No. Thanks to you. You’re great at this. Marcel is right. You should stay.”

“It’s too big a risk that they’ll come for me and hurt you guys.”

Marcel laughs. “We can handle anyone that comes after you. You belong here with us.”

The other server calls to me before I can acknowledge his words. I hope I can stay.

The following evening, A tray of drinks rests on my overturned palm. A voice calls out from the kitchen, which sits between the restaurant and the bar. “Pick up, chère.”

It’s sweet that Marcel calls the women he likes ‘chère.’ I asked him earlier, and he explained it was a familiar nickname his people use.

After I set down the drinks on a table near the pool tables, I head to the kitchen and claim the tray of finger foods. Walking by tables, people motion for my attention. The bar smells like lemon cleaner and beer. Jefferson’s a stickler for a clean bar, and it gives me great satisfaction to clean it every morning before I go upstairs and pour myself into the bed.

Jefferson loves eighties rock. He’s such a fan that there are vinyl records tacked up around the bar. There’s a stage in the corner, but the dust on the outlets tells me it hasn’t been used in a while. The bar is a duplicate in size to the adjacent restaurant, but that’s where the similarity ends. Where the restaurant is bright and homey, the bar is dark and lively. Heavy wood tables take up space in the main room of the bar. Jefferson’s pride and joy is a wall of autographed photos from bands of the eighties. AC/DC, Kiss, Boston, and Chicago, just to name a few of the bands represented on the wall.

Julie, my taxi driver from the first night, is staying over in the upstairs bedroom next to the one I’m using. She stops by every few weeks to spend the weekend with her brother. I distribute the appetizers to the various patrons and smile at the other server when she calls me a natural.

“You just want me to close tonight too.”

She beams at my comment as I move into the kitchen to eat the food Marcel sets aside every night for my dinner. The delicious aroma tickles my nose and makes my mouth water. I’m sure I’ve gained weight working here and eating Marcel’s food. Can’t say I mind that at all. My mind floats back to my one-night stand with Rory. Wish I’d gotten his number. A trip to Europe to stay away from the men chasing me would be the perfect distraction.

“The cops are coming. You need to leave.” Jefferson bellows at the bar as banging and raised voices from the bar get the attention of everyone in the kitchen. I move to the doorway to peek out.

“Where is she?” A dark-haired man in a leather jacket and chains in his pockets screams at everyone. His hand balls up his fist, and he strikes Jefferson in the face. “Where is the little bitch!” Spittle comes out of the man’s mouth as he yells. “Now.”

A hand wraps around my upper arms, maneuvering me back into the kitchen. Marcel whispers. “Get back in here and hide. They’re after you.”

“What? Oh God.” I struggle to pull my arm from his hand. “They’re going to get hurt.”

“Better Jefferson than you.”

“But...” I don’t get to finish my sentence before sirens echo from the parking lot as a bloody Jefferson with a split lip, two black eyes, and various bruises runs into the kitchen. “Amira, get your stuff. We’ve got to get you out of here.”

“Who’s out there?”

“Three guys from the local biker gang were looking for you. A couple of the regulars zip tied them for the cops, but they have a dozen or more in their gang. My sister will take you somewhere else. Let’s go get your stuff.” He leads me up the back stairs to the second floor where his sister sleeps. He stops to wake her as I go to clean out my room. So much for feeling safe and happy.

Marcel leans against the doorway as I pack up my stuff in my duffel once again. “I’m so sorry they found you.”

Blowing out my breath, I catch the sob with my fist. “I don’t know where to go.”

The other server joins Marcel at my door. She purses her lips as she stares out the small window. “Who do you know that the people chasing you don’t?”

Faces of friends and family pass through my brain like photos on a reel. I reach the end of my list and focus on my friend, Melanie. She’s a fellow model, and I trust her. She lives in Phoenix. I sling my bag over my shoulder with my backpack. “How do I get to Phoenix?”

Julie answers from behind Marcel. “I’ve been thinking about that. We need to get you a few things for your next adventure. When we get in my car, I’ll explain.”

RORIC

Once again, Fingers figured out another SUV for me to appropriate in an airport parking lot. Phoenix’s Sky Harbor Airport has an incredible number of SUVs in long-term parking to choose from. I’m waiting for Fingers to get back to me with the address of Rosa’s friend, Melanie, who lives here in Phoenix. My mind races with ideas and schemes, trying to figure out what is the best way to lure her to go with me. Will it be enough for me to just run into her for her to remember our one-night stand together and just think it’s a coincidence? I’m not sure, but I don’t get a lot of time to

dwell on it before Fingers gets back to me. My phone rings. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me. I found that Melanie girl’s address. I’m not sure she’s actually in town though. It appears to me that she’s on some modeling assignment and may have just made it possible for Rosa to show up at her apartment. Do you have a plan to take her? Or are you just going to take care of her?”

I’m not killing her. But I know for a fact there is no way I can just walk up and knock on her door. As a businessman, she last saw me in Prague, but she knows I live in New York City. Somebody from New York wouldn’t just walk up to some house or apartment or condo in Phoenix. “Text me the address and any other information you can give me on Melanie.”

“Sure, not a problem, boss. Let me know if you need anything else.”

‘Boss.’ Now that is something I’ll never be. As the third son to my father, the pakhan to our bratva, I’ll never be the guy in charge. My mind scrambles. If I’m honest with myself, my mind is just so absorbed with seeing her again.

The asphalt crunches under my tires as I drive into the parking lot. This is gonna be way too easy. It’s obvious that lots of these condos are short-term rentals. I pick up my phone and I dial Fingers. “Hey, can you find me a short-term rental in this condo complex?” I can hear him typing on his computer. I’m sure his tongue is hanging out of his mouth, and he’s staring at the screen willing whatever thing I asked for to appear.

He clears his throat. “Yeah. I’ve got one. It’s actually two doors down from Melanie’s condo.” I smile even though no one is around to notice. “That’s perfect. Can you make it happen in the next half hour?” The pause annoys me. Normally Fingers is immediate to respond.

The pause breaks as he answers. “Yeah, I think I can make that happen. There’s a coffee shop down the block. You should grab a coffee, and I’ll get back to you as soon as I’ve set this up.”

I decide to sit in the SUV, staring at the building that houses Rosa. I don’t wanna leave. What if something happens, and she decides to leave, then I’ll be chasing my tail again to try to find her?

About twenty minutes later, Fingers calls me back. “Hey. I did it. It took me a little bit more money than I would’ve expected, but the owner of the condo bypassed his required background check in order to get you into the condo now.”

“Great. How do I get in?”

“Everything in his condo is electronic. I’m texting you the code and the directions. Do you want back up?”

Asking me if I want back up annoys the fuck out of me. I growl back at Fingers. “Of course not, when have I ever needed back up?”

“Yeah, yeah I get it. I’m sorry. Let me know if there’s anything else you need.”

I get out of the SUV, grabbing my bag out of the back and glancing at the instructions to get into the condo. My mind is weaving a tale to tell her when her door opens, and she sees me. I drop my bag at the doorstep, hoping she’s close enough to her door that she’ll be curious and open to peek outside. She doesn’t. I open the door. It’s a typical condo for this area in Phoenix. Nice enough. But wouldn’t be glamorous enough for a rich little princess. I wonder if that’s been broken out of her during her runaway stint? I throw my bag on the table and go to the refrigerator to find a bottle of water. Things you can guarantee in a short-term rental: all the hygiene products you might need and water in the fridge. On the fridge is a list of whatever streaming

platform is available on the TV and a plethora of takeout or delivery restaurants to keep you fed.

I move the chair and sit closer to the door to hear any activity in the hall. Will she just walk out? Does her friend have enough pantry food items or available delivery services to feed her? Will she need to go out? These are all interesting questions, but ultimately the biggest one that's hanging over my head is how do I get Snow White to come out and meet her hunter? The analogy causes me to smile, and I continue to sit listening to the hallway.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:04 pm

ROSA

Staring out the window of Melanie's condo, I count the number of white cars that drive by. Why are there so many white cars in Phoenix? When I called Melanie and she said I could stay here, I thought it would be perfect, but now that I'm here... There is nothing to do. She doesn't have a TV or a stereo. I guess she's never really here, so why would she? I flick through the food delivery menus and settle for pizza. My mind searches for the last time I worked out. It's been forever since I did anything of my usual routine. I don't even have a cell phone. Julie took it before I got on the truck to get here. Everyone at the bar figured that was how the bikers found me. Thirty minutes later, the knock on my door tells me the driver has left my food. I'm so lucky that Melanie has accounts with the restaurants, and she said I could use them. No one will know it's not her ordering the food.

RORIC

A few hours pass by, and I'm becoming impatient. I need to figure out a way to get her to come out of her apartment. A person strolls up to her door with a bag. Damn. I should have thought of that. Before I can reach the handle, her door opens, an arm slips out, and the bag is inside. My stomach rumbles as I decide I might as well use the food delivery service myself. Scanning through the plethora of takeout menus, I select the menu for Chinese. I grab my cell phone and order the three entrées I prefer and a beer. If I'm gonna have to sit here for the rest of the night, I should eat.

Twenty minutes later, a knock at the door reminds me I still need to move my chair. Stretching my neck, I stand, slide the chair aside, and open the door. A nerdy-looking young man stands there, holding out a plastic bag while awkwardly juggling a small

cooler. As I take the bag and shift it in my hand, he pulls out the single bottle of beer and gives it to me.

I thank the kid and nod as the door opens catty corner across the hall. Rosa steps out with a basket, and her eyes catch mine. I tell myself to make it good. “Rosa?” Damn, I could get an Oscar for this performance.

Her face lights up and then dims, her smile hovers but never quite clicks onto her face. “Rory?”

I push open my door to set my food down just inside the door. Smiling, I approach her across the hall. “Oh my God, I never thought I’d see you again after you snuck out of my hotel room.”

The slight blush that creeps up her cheeks reminds me of when I tied her hands for the first time. She dips her head and picks it back up. “What are you doing here?”

There’s a hint of happiness in that question. “I’m in town for a few weeks, and my company arranged a short-term rental instead of a hotel.” Leaning against the wall, I try to look more casual as she fumbles with the basket in her arm.

“Wow I...”

I smile. This is my opportunity to put her in her place and make her more amenable to my request. Crossing my arms, I look down at the little nymph and speak with a small growl to my tone. “You just left.”

She chews on her lip as her eyes catch mine and there’s a glimmer of sadness that wasn’t there before. “I’m sorry I... One of my friends called to let me know that my father had come to town. If I wasn’t there at the hotel, when he got there, I have no idea what he might’ve done to me.”

My brow lifts. “Was that really a concern? Is your father some kind of ogre?”

The scared mouse look on her face makes me feel bad for asking in the cavalier way. I know what an asshole her father was. Obviously, his entire family is evil, considering they’re after her and want me to track her down and kill her.

She swings her head back-and-forth as though she’s trying to knock out a memory. “My father was not a good man.”

I cock my head. “Was?”

“Yes. He recently passed away. “

My brow lifts again. I raise the octave of my voice as I ask. “What happened to him?”

She waves her hand as she looks down at the floor and mumbles. “He had a heart attack.”

I hide my smile with her excuse as to what happened to her dad. Would she tell someone that she knew well what really happened? I don’t really get the chance to ask before she steps away from her friend’s door with her basket in hand.

Chewing her lip, she cocks her head. “Have you been to Phoenix before?”

I smile and nod at the basket. “No. This is my first visit.” She nods again as she leans to head down the hallway. I raise my hand to catch her attention. “Have you eaten?”

She nods as she shutter steps. Time to get her inside. Dipping her head before she picks it up to look at me. “Why?”

I chuckle at her question. “Well, I haven’t, and I hate to eat alone. I have Chinese.

You mentioned in the hotel room that you like chicken teriyaki, and I have some in my bag.” I lean towards her and turn my body, leading her to the idea of coming with me. “Why don’t you just come in? Keep me company. Your laundry will wait.”

“I just ate.”

“Okay, but I have a washer and dryer in here.”

She nods as she follows me into my condo. Well, that was easier than I thought.

She sets the basket down as I move to the small dining table with the bag and my beer. I motion for her to take a chair. As she sits down. I set the bag on the table, turning to head to the refrigerator. “There are drinks in the fridge: soda, ginger ale, and water. Anything interest you?”

She chews on her bottom lip again and nods. “A ginger ale would be great.”

I grab the can, crack it open, and set it in front of her, before reaching into the bag and pulling out plastic ware and a napkin. Smiling, I sit down on the bench. “What brings you to Phoenix?”

She shreds the plastic wrap covering the chopsticks, setting the utensils onto the table for me. I pull out the containers, opening them up, realizing we need plates. I dash to the kitchen and open the cabinets, pulling out two plates. She’s shaking her head as I walk back to set out a plate for her and one for me. I scoop chicken teriyaki onto her plate along with some white rice as she smiles.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Well, it’s too much food for me, after all. Just a bite while you tell me what brought you here.”

“I decided to come visit my friend Melanie. She’s on a modeling assignment, but she should be back in a couple of days.”

I scoop Kung Pow Chicken, Chicken Teriyaki, and Broccoli Beef onto my plate as I lean back smiling. “Well, this is fortunate.” That blush that makes me so happy creeps up her neck and onto her face. She bats her eyes with a smile. I nod as I use my chopsticks to grab a piece of chicken teriyaki and scrape it through the rice.

She holds my gaze for a moment before she nibbles off her plate. A few moments later, she raises her head and smiles. “I’m sorry I just left.”

“It’s fine.” I set down my fork and crack open my beer, taking a big swig before I set it down. I give her the look that I know will wet her panties and smile. “That’s okay. I’ll just punish you for leaving without my permission.”

Rosa squirms in her chair. I know her brain is thinking about what I said, and the sadistic part of me is happy that she’s worrying about what I’m going to do to her. We finish our meal with idle conversation about bits and pieces of nothing. I pick up the Styrofoam containers and put them back into the plastic bag as I get up walk across the dining area and drop them into the open trash. I turn as she stands smiling I know this is the time. “Did I say you should stand up, baby?”

“..... My laundry.”

I flick my head to her basket and smile. “I think that can wait, don’t you?” Her facial expression reminds me of her youth and inexperience. She’s not quite sure what I’m asking for. Once again, I have the upper hand. The thought floats across my brain. When was the last time I didn’t have complete control?

She sits back down in the chair and waits like the patient girl I would expect. She glances over to the black bag that I have resting on the back of the sofa. “Did you just

get here?”

“Yes. I actually just arrived in time to order food because I hadn’t eaten.”

“Oh.” Her big eyes expand. “So, what are you doing here in Phoenix? Is it more of your family’s logistical business?”

I sit down in the chair next to her and put my hand on her arm, stroking my fingers down her bare skin. “Yes. There’s a company that needs my family’s assistance, and that’s why I’m here.”

A loud thump in the hallway causes her to jump in her seat. “Hey.” I pull her from her seat into my lap. “You’re safe with me. What’s this all about?”

She ducks her head into my chest. “I have people after me.”

I use my fingers to raise her head to see into her eyes. “What people?”

She avoids my gaze. “I…”

“Rosa!” My growl is harsher than I intend, but she focuses on my face. “What people?”

Her voice is low as she answers. “My father’s people. I was there when my father died. They want something from me.”

“What do they want pretty girl?”

“I took something.”

I nod. So, the cartel lied about her. Not surprised at all. Play it cool. I can’t ask about

the thing she took. Be patient. She relaxes as I adjust her against my chest. “You’re safe. No one is going to hurt you.”

“Again.” She wipes a tear that falls down her face. “No one is going to hurt me again.”

The protector side of me roars at her words. “Who hurt you?”

She snuffles as she takes a breath. “My father hurt me, and his uncle thought it was perfectly okay to smack me around when he saw fit. Luckily, I haven’t had to spend a lot of time with them.”

“That’s awful. No one should treat you that way.” I stand with her in my arms and walk us to the living room. “Do you really think they’ll come to Phoenix to find you?”

She shrugs as she snuggles in on my lap. “A biker gang tried to take me from the last place. I can’t imagine the lengths they’ll go to find me.”

“Well, I’m here now.”

Just that fast, she’s asleep. I stand to pick her up and carry her into the bedroom, pulling off her shoes as I lay her down. She looks so tiny on the king size bed. I step away, leaving a light on in the primary bathroom. Dialing, my father answers.

“Roric?”

I answer in Russian. I don’t want the nymph to hear any of my conversation. “I have the girl. They lied about why they want her. She apparently took something that night from her father. I have zero reason to think she’d tell anyone about how he died. They just wanted us to do their work for them.”

“Can you get her back here? Does she know who you are?”

“I’ll think of a plan to convince her. Her family has contracted out to get her. And, no, she doesn’t know who I am, but I did meet her before all of this in Prague.”

My father growls. “You’re just telling me this now?”

“I didn’t think it mattered. If she was going to hurt our family, it wouldn’t matter if I knew her.”

He blows out a breath and offers silence. “I’ll see what else I can find out. Be safe. Don’t let them find either of you until we know what the fuck is going on.”

“Yes, Papa.” I end the call and lean against the hallway wall. I’ve never wanted another woman as much as I want the little beautiful nymph asleep in the bed. Quietly, I peek around the doorframe to confirm she’s still asleep. Satisfied she’s safe, I move to the kitchen and dial Fingers.

“Hello?”

“Who’s coming for her next?”

He clacks away on the keyboard. “Have you seen her?”

“Yes. She’s with me. Safe.”

Fingers chuckles. “That was quick. Let me guess, she’s in your bed.”

“That’s none of your fucking business, Fingers. Find out how safe we are and get back to me.” I set down the phone and look out the peephole. Stepping back to my bag, I pull out a camera. Fingers makes sure we have simple surveillance equipment

in our go bags. I walk out the condo door with the camera and my phone, setting it into the fake plant at the end of the hall. The view on my phone should let me know if someone comes looking for her. The clothes basket beckons me. The rental has a convenience washer and dryer, so I pick up her basket and toss her clothes into the washer. Thirty minutes later, I transfer her clothes to the dryer. Glancing at my watch. I've wasted enough time. My body is itching to join her in the bed. I strip down to my briefs and t-shirt and snuggle next to the woman that's haunted my thoughts since we met.

ROSA

The room is dark and quiet, except for the faint sounds of traffic outside, and I can smell the humongous man behind me. He smells like sandalwood and amber with a hint of citrus. It's the same scent from Prague. He's wrapped me into his body and breathes slowly at my neck. I want him. Sex with him was as good as the dirty books I read, and I need the release. I shift my ass against his crotch and move slowly, listening to him moan and stir.

"You should stop that."

"I don't want to stop it." I want to feel you again. Just a romp with a skilled lover in case I die later. "I know you want me."

Rory scoffs. "Of course I want you. I've thought about you almost every day since you disappeared."

His words sound so sincere. "I'm sorry about that. I needed to get to my dad."

"Fine. I get it." His cock grows along the length of my ass, which makes me smile. "If you don't stop, I'm going to fuck you."

“Ha. Promises, promises.”

He pushes my arm down behind me, so I’m lying on my back and spins atop me, kissing me as his hand rubs under my shirt. “You have the softest skin.”

A blush blooms up my neck and onto my face.

He leans back to stare at me with concern. “What’s this? You should be used to compliments.”

If only they didn’t carry requirements. “I don’t like them. I’m not special.”

He drops to my side and rests his head on his hand. “Of course you’re special. You’re a model.”

“That’s my body. My mother put me in modeling to make it more difficult for my father to steal me and sell me. I hate it. Men only want women for one reason.”

“That may be other men. But not me. My mother was the best person I’ve ever known. She was brilliant and nurturing. She loved us with her whole heart. Her beauty captivated everyone around her, and it wasn’t her looks, though she was stunning. Her heart showcased her true beauty. Like you.”

“You can’t know that about me, Rory.”

“Sure, I can. You’re not some spoiled diva. If you were, you would have sold yourself to a powerful man to keep you safe.”

“Never.” I exhale. “I want a man who wants me for me. Someone I can trust.”

He nuzzles my neck. “I want you for you. I admit you’re gorgeous, but I like you.

You're intelligent and kind, not self-absorbed. And I want to get to know you better.”
His face softens. “We don't have to do this.”

I run my fingers around his neck. “Oh. Yes, we do. I want you to make me come like you did in Prague.”

His smile lifts and his pupils expand. “How many times did you come in Prague?”

I can't answer before his mouth is on mine. His tongue delves in as I gasp. Expert hands caress my torso and settle on my breasts. I want him more than I want my next breath.

A little flicker of inquiry sparks in my mind questioning birth control, but before I can wrap my brain around it, my hand is grabbing his cock as my other pushes down his briefs. He divests me of my shirt and panties without missing a beat. Three strokes and his cock hardens like steel. “Oh, my.”

He raises to his knees as he leans down to kiss me again. “Tell me to stop.”

My core is on fire with lust, and I couldn't stop if I tried. “No. Fuck me.”

“I promise the next one will be slower.”

My breath catches in an “oh,” as he swipes his cock up and down in my soaking slit.

“You're so responsive.” He angles the head to push in, and I'm so close to an orgasm. One brush across my clit is all I'd need. I slip my finger down to touch it as he pulls out. “No.”

My eyes widen. “No?”

“No. I pleasure you. I know what you need. Be patient.”

The scolding should bother me, but it makes me hotter. What would it be like to be dominated by someone who cares about me? My brain can't continue thinking about it because my pussy is full of the gorgeous man. His hands push up my knees as he settles deeper, pistoning in and out.

“Oh. That's good.”

Chuckling, his hand moves to my mound as his thumb flicks my nub back and forth, matching the rhythm of his cock. My heart is pounding in my chest with desire. I need to come, and he's going to make it happen. It's just out of reach as he adjusts the angle of penetration to hit just the right spot. I don't have the brain power to react, but my body does. Tightening like a spring, my body primes for an explosion. A swift intake of air spurs him on, increasing speed as I hurtle through time and space into a mind-blowing orgasm. “Oh. Yeah.” My curling toes numb as my senses focus on the exquisite feeling of his cock driving me to bliss. He's kissing me back to reality, and my heart fills with joy. I like him way too much. I've only known him for such a little while. My mother's words about men bounce around in my mind. I pull him down to hold him against me as he continues to work. I feel him find his own release.

His lips graze over my forehead as he moves from the bed into the bathroom.

Regret. I lured the man because I wanted him and the orgasm he so expertly gives, but I should have waited. I acted like a whore, and whores get treated like whores.

Rory stands at the edge of the bed with a washcloth in hand. “Are you okay?”

“What? Yeah. I'm just tired.” Taking the cloth from his hand, I jump up, maneuvering around him to the bathroom. I clean myself and pee, as I will myself to leave the bathroom to face the man who did exactly what I asked.

The knock on the door makes me jump. “I’ll be right out.”

As I exit, Rory’s sitting on the bed, staring. “What happened?”

Blowing out my breath, I cross my arms to protect my fragile feelings. “Thank you for the orgasm.”

He busts out laughing and catches himself, stifling his laugh. “You’re welcome.” He extends his hands to me and pulls me onto his lap. “What’s wrong?”

“I... You probably think I’m a whore.”

Before I can react, I’m across his lap with his hand spanking my ass. “You will never refer to yourself as anything like that again. You are not a whore, and if you ever demean yourself again, I’ll beat your ass until you can’t sit down.” Another blow pops my cheek. He sits me back up as tears stream down my face. I wipe them with the back of my hand.

“I’m sorry.”

Rory’s tight jaw softens. “What are you apologizing for, exactly?”

“I made you mad.”

“No. You should apologize for insulting yourself. You can’t do that.”

Doubt bubbles up from my soul. “Why not?”

“You deserve better.”

Gah. He’s right. “Okay. I guess you’re right. I just... I forced you to have sex, and

I'm afraid you'll think I'm the kind of woman who does that with other men."

"Rosa. I'm very sure you aren't that kind of woman. What we had in Prague was awesome. You needed some relief, and a part of you trusts me. I'm happy to scratch your itch. I enjoyed it." He winks. "And I'm happy to do it anytime you need."

Laughter gushes up as I nod. "Yes, sir."

He holds me against him before he moves us back onto the bed. "Sleep, Snow White."

I chuckle. "My mother calls me Snow White."

"It's what I thought when I first saw you."

I flick my hair. "It's not nearly as dark as it was." Rory yawns, and I can imagine what he looked like with the mother he continues to adore.

"All you need are little animals singing around you, and you'd be her." He drifts back into slumber as I lie there and dwell on the current situation. Way to go, Rosa. You're not on birth control anymore, and he didn't use a condom. Stupid. Stupid.

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:04 pm

ROSA

Light fills the room. It's not Melanie's bedroom. I jerk more awake and realize a warm cocoon holds my body, and I remember. Rory. His scent permeates my nose with the scent of sex to remind me of the wee hours in the morning. This is the safest I've felt since Prague. His strong arms wrap around me. Nothing can hurt me so long as he's here. The need to pee drives me out of his arms.

"Baby?"

"I've got to pee." His chuckling feels so right. I move to the bathroom and relieve myself. Glancing in the mirror, I'm naked, and my hair looks like I've shoved my finger in a light socket. I've got nothing to smooth it down. The shower looks so inviting, but my only clean clothes are across the hall.

A knock startles me. "One second." I move to answer the door.

"Here are your clothes."

The man washed and dried my clothes. I stare at the basket and then raise my eyes to his. "Thank you." I reach for the basket as he smirks, edging around me into the bathroom.

"Grab a shower. I'll rustle up some breakfast." He kisses my forehead before he exits the door, leaving me staring at his retreating backside.

Standing in the shower with the water streaming down, I can't get the man out of my

head. To be honest, I haven't been able to forget him. My body hums. What he did with my body this morning and in Prague, fills my soul with happiness. I finish my shower and put on fresh clothes. Is today the day they find me? Dread creeps up my spine as I walk out the door.

The table is set for two people and Rory stands next to the table like an expectant child waiting for a present. "Breakfast should be here soon. I got a sampling of everything from the diner down the block."

"I'm starving. Thank you."

He motions for me to sit as I catch his scent again. Would I be a slut if I jumped him right now? The tapping at the door prevents me from answering my own question, but it hangs in the back of my mind. I want him. To be honest, he's the only man I've ever wanted.

He sets the bags on the table and dishes out the food. "You've lost weight since Europe."

I glance down at the tank top and boy shorts I put on. "It's been hard to stay on a routine. I'm afraid."

His hands wrap around me, pulling me onto his lap. "You don't need to be afraid anymore. I'm here now."

Could it be that easy? I rest my head against his chest. The luscious aroma teases my nose as I lean for the plate of food and my fork. "My favorites."

"I'm glad you like what I ordered." He adjusts me on his lap so I can eat off my plate, and he can eat off of his. "Are you ready to tell me all about what's going on?"

His tone compels me to speak. I open my mouth and jump when a loud bang slams in the hallway. Rory grabs his phone. He's looking at a view of the hallway. He has a camera? I stare at him while he watches the screen.

"I always set up a camera to guard my door. It just happened to cover your door across the hall as well."

I nod. "It's them." Men in black motorcycle leather with 'Phoenix Inferno' written on the backs. The emblem is different from the guys at the bar. My hand instinctively goes to my mouth.

"You're okay." Rory moves me back to the bedroom. "Stay here." He closes the door as I sit in the closet with my fist against my mouth.

It's an eternity until Rory is back. He's dressed and has my clothes basket in his hands. He sets it on the floor next to the closet. "Get dressed and throw your clothes into my black bag."

"I've got stuff in the apartment."

"Yeah. I guessed that. Is the thing you stole there too?"

I shake my head slowly. "It's with me."

"Okay. Be ready to leave in a few minutes."

"Really?"

"We'll be okay. Trust me."

I take a deep breath. I do. I can't explain why, but I do.

Rory comes back moments later and picks up his black bag. “Stay close. We’re stepping across the hall to grab your other stuff, then coming back.”

He checks his phone and cracks the door open to peer out into the hall. Grabbing my hand, he leads me across the hall to the broken door that hangs haphazardly on a single hinge. He pushes the door, and we slip by, into the living room. “Grab your stuff.”

I grab my bags and scoop the random stuff back in. They took my cash and the extra visa card. I scan the floor, looking for anything they missed. Rory reaches his hand down to me as he grabs my bags. I blurt out. “They could come back.”

“I think we’ve got a few minutes. But we need to move.” He wraps his arm around me and sticks his head out into the hall. Moving across the hall, we duck back into his condo. He shuts the door behind us and heads to the window to surveil the back parking area. “Grab the snacks out of the basket in the fridge and on the counter, throw them in one of the bags, and let’s go.”

I do as he orders, offering a silent prayer that we get away from the men to safety.

He hands me my backpack and hoists the other bags on his shoulder, leading us into the hallway. We walk by the plant and his camera catches my eye. “Shouldn’t you grab that?”

“No. It’ll be good to see if they come back here.”

“Okay.”

He steps out of the door into the side parking lot and uses a fob to open a black SUV parked nearby. We hustle to the vehicle as he tosses the bags in the back as he holds the passenger door open for me. “You should crouch down on the floorboard in case

someone is watching vehicles leave.”

I skooch down and hold my breath. The vehicle shifts into gear, and we drive. A few moments later, the SUV raises and lowers over a speed bump. By the time I expel the breath I’m holding, Rory is making a right turn onto Camelback Road.

“You can sit up.”

“How the fuck do they keep finding me?”

RORIC

My eyes drift to her face as she catches my glare. “Start from the beginning.”

She blows out her breath. “I don’t want to get you involved. They are dangerous men.”

“In case you haven’t figured it out yet, I can handle them.”

“You don’t understand.” She swallows. “They’re killers.”

My chuckle sounds more ominous than I want, but her brow lifts. “I can handle them!”

“I saw my father murdered.” Her head snaps to watch for a reaction from me. I make sure to keep my face very still. “But that’s not why they’re after me. My father’s family knows I took a flash drive with files about the family business. They aren’t good people, if you get my meaning.”

“Go on.”

“I didn’t plan it, but after he was shot, it was just there in the laptop, so I pulled the flash drive and pocketed it. My father was akin to the devil. I mean that literally. His uncle is evil. He does evil things.” She shudders. “He would have trafficked me to some old rich dude, but my mother’s family has connections.” Her eyes focus on a moth against the glass, and then pivots to study my reactions.

Every part of me wants to pull her into my arms and hold her, making sure no one ever scares her again. “Where is your mother and her family?”

“My mother has lived in Mexico for the past twelve years. Her family lives in Dallas. Her parents’ friends ostracized her when my father’s identity was revealed. The rich girl who succumbed to the dirty criminal. She couldn’t take the spitefulness, so she left. The cartel...” She shakes her head. “You didn’t hear that.”

“It’s fine.” I hate the Aguilar more than I did before. Papa and Cynric need to know about the flash drive, and everything in my soul wants to keep her safe. “We’re going to get to safety. They won’t get their hands on you, but we need to figure out what’s on that drive.”

“I don’t care anymore what’s on it. I just want them to leave me alone.”

“Nevertheless, we need to figure out what they’re hiding, so we know how to protect you.”

She scoffs. “It’s not like we can just walk into the computer store and plug this into a USB port and read the files.”

“True. But I have a friend who can.”

“A friend? You... trust this friend?”

“I do. His name is Fingers. You’ll like him. I’ll call him, and he’ll meet us.” The lilt in my voice conveys confidence.

“Sure. Do you think what’s on the flash drive will help me?”

“Maybe. It’s better to know what’s on it, and Fingers is good with computers. He’ll figure out why they want it back so bad.”

She pulls her legs up into the seat, nodding. “I’m hungry.”

I scan the horizon for restaurant signs. A blue sign for a diner catches my interest as I take the off ramp. Pulling into the crumbly asphalt lot, I pick the parking spot closest to the restaurant’s rear door. There are half a dozen cars parked around the lot, but none catches my eye. Stepping inside, it’s a typical off-ramp diner. The lady behind the counter waves and points to a booth. We take our seats as the woman hands us the legal-sized, laminated menus.

“The special is meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and a vegetable.” Her eyes direct us to the glass container at the end of the counter where there are slices of pie and other desserts. Rosa’s stomach growls from across the booth. The server asks. “What would you both like to drink?”

“I’ll take a coffee, and she’ll take an iced tea with lemon.” She walks away as Rosa peruses her menu.

I’ve never been a big fan of diner food. I’ve eaten my share of meatloaf. It was a dish my mother often cooked herself, rather than having our housekeeper make something.

Rosa sets her hands on her menu. “You remembered how I like my tea.”

“Yeah. I paid attention when we talked about the things you like in the car.” It seemed like the thing to do. She’s slowly slipping under my protection. I need to look through that flash drive and see if there is anything about us on it.

“Rory, how do you know they won’t find us?”

“I’m better than they are. No one is going to hurt you.”

“Can you just stop working for your company to help me?”

“Yes. You’re more important. I texted my father. He understands that this is what I need to be doing. The other things can wait.”

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Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 4:04 pm

ROSA

Two days later, we're hiding in the back of the semi-trailer Rory found us at the motel. He's done as he promised, keeping me safe. I can't figure out how the men keep finding us. Two hours after the diner, two bikers ride up to our SUV. Rory outmaneuvers the bikers, with impressive driving skills I didn't expect, but it means we have to ditch the ride. As we get back to New Mexico, my heart wonders about the bar and the kind people who befriended me. That feels like a lifetime ago.

"Hey?" He pulls me into his body. The floor of the trailer is hard, and it's pitch black. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking about the people I met in New Mexico."

"It's great you found good people. You had to leave because of those bikers, right?"

"Yeah. My family must have employed every biker in the country to find me."

"I know it feels like that."

The burner phone he picked up after we ran from the motel rings. "Hello? Yeah. Good." He ends the call. "Fingers will meet us in Dallas tomorrow."

"How do you know that the people won't find us in Dallas?"

"I promised you'd be safe."

“I know, but they keep finding us.” I’m beginning to think my father had me GPS chipped like a dog.

“There’s a safe place for us. It’s going to be okay.”

I immerse myself in his scent and will my body to relax.

RORIC

We’re resting in a safe house owned by our bratva. Quiet time plays havoc on my mind, and I’m reliving some of my latest assassinations. I counted up the number of people I’ve tortured and killed: One hundred and thirteen. Bile rests in the back of my throat. Not for the lives I’ve destroyed or taken, but for the lie I’ve told the woman who sleeps in my bed. Rosa’s soft breaths against my chest poke at my conscience. She’ll never forgive me for lying to her. The clock reads six in the morning, and I know Fingers should arrive soon. I push myself off the mattress and pad to the bathroom, peeing before I step into the shower. Put on your game face. Make sure Fingers can’t guess that you’re falling for the waif in the bed.

Fifteen minutes later, the bathroom door opens, and she walks in. Her brown hair is matted and unruly, her face wears a crease from the bedding, and she smiles. Damn that smile. Twinkling blue eyes sparkle back at me as I step out of the shower with a raging hard on.

She points and giggles. “Someone’s happy to see me.”

“We’re both happy.”

She sits down on the toilet. “When will your friend be here?”

“Eight or so. I wanted to make food before he gets here.”

She dips her head. “That’s nice. Thanks.” She stands and flushes. “I’ll just grab my shower.”

My hand brushes her arm as she scoots around me to the shower. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

She beams, leaning to kiss my cheek. “I know. You saved me.” She steps into the shower as I hightail it out of the room, heading for the kitchen of the little two-bedroom bungalow.

Pulling out the pans and the food in the fridge, I’m overwhelmed by guilt. What the hell am I going to do?

Three minutes after eight, a knock on the door startles Rosa. I glance at my burner to see the video for the front door camera I put out for our safety. Fingers loiters on the porch. I turn to Rosa. “He’s here.”

Her nervousness endears her to me even more. I won’t let her go when this is over.

Fingers rushes in with his computer bag in his hand as he fumbles to open it. He stops short to stare at Rosa. “Uh. Hi.”

“Hi. I’m Rosa.”

“I’m Fred. Well, Fingers. Everybody calls me Fingers.”

“Hi Fred.”

Fingers beams at her as I shake my head. Damn flirt.

Rosa dips her head to me. “I’ll get it.” She walks to the bedroom and skips to us with

the flash drive prominently held between two fingers. “Here.” She hands it to Fingers.

He takes the USB with a gentle touch and places it against his laptop to insert. “Do you know if there’s a password?”

She leans against the sofa, overseeing the dining table. “Couldn’t tell ya. I pulled it out of the laptop. I have no idea what’s on it either, though my father always kept it on him and was very careful with it.”

His fingers fly on the keyboard. “I’m sure that’s why his people want it back.”

“Yeah. Probably.”

I grab a seat next to Fingers as he opens files. Fingers lifts his fingers and turns the screen to face me. “No real protection. A small encryption, which I divested in record time.”

I glance at Rosa, who lifts her chin. “Feel free. I think I’ll go find something to watch on TV in the bedroom.” She leaves and Fingers elbows my side.

“Damn, she’s gorgeous.”

I keep my voice low. “You’ve seen her photo.”

“Doesn’t do her justice, man. What’s your father going to say when you tell him you’ve claimed her?”

“What? I...”

“Come on Rory.” He emphasizes the name I’m using and nods at the bedroom. “It’s obvious. Who can blame you? I’ve searched for everything I can find about her.

She's fucking Mother Theresa in a rocking hot bod and stunning face. She shares whatever money she makes modeling with people in need, and everyone who meets her loves her. Except her family. They just want to use her to make money."

I grumble. "Over my dead body."

"Yeppers. I get that." He looks around me at the hall. "I haven't figured out how they're finding her. You might convince her to leave everything behind and start over. Maybe one of her bags has a tracker."

"Take the drive to Papa, and I'll slowly get us back to New York over the next week. That should give Papa and Cynric time to dissect the drive and find enough to destroy the Aguilers."

"I assume that doesn't include the hot chick."

"Fingers."

"Sure, boss. I'll keep my ideas to myself. Do you want short-term rentals or motels on your adventure back to New York?"

"Motels are fine, but I like the Campbell Luxury Hotel in New Orleans, so book that and include a new wardrobe for Rosa with designer luggage, so she'll ditch this stuff."

"Okay. Tell her I said bye."

We both stand up as Fingers collects his stuff to put in his backpack. "How much time do we have before they find us again?"

"If they follow the usual pattern, the Dallas bikers should be here in the morning,

early. Might want to head out sooner rather than later. I'll leave the SUV I borrowed." He smirks to let me know he swiped it from the airport. "I'll Uber back to catch my flight."

Walking Fingers to the door, I notice Rosa watching from the hall. "Bye."

"See ya." Fingers throws up his hand and catches my eyes as he leaves. He won't tell my father or Cynric.

ROSA

Rory convinced me to take a nap at the house so we could travel by night on our way to New Orleans. He thinks the safest place for me is New York, where the cartel won't think to look. I'm not sure it makes the most sense, but I trust him. We're heading down Interstate 45 South, in case we need to divert to Houston. It'll take us almost nine hours unless we stop for more than gas. And I'll have to stop to pee.

"Whatcha thinking about?"

"I've always wanted to see New Orleans." I chew on my lower lip, thinking.

"Are you sad we didn't reach out to your family?"

His comment catches me off-guard. He talks like we had a choice. "I'm glad we didn't see them. I don't want to bring trouble to their door."

He reaches over the console and squeezes my hand. "It won't be forever, and then we'll get you back to your mother."

"Pfft. I don't see how that happens. It's not like my family is going to just let me get away. At some point, they'll find me." Tears slide down my cheeks. "And you."

“You worry too much. Let me take that burden. You just relax.”

“I feel so blessed that we found each other again. Thank you for taking care of me.”

Rory squeezes my hand again. That’s it? After everything, you don’t offer any words for me? My heart seizes in my chest, thinking I’ve given my heart, and he doesn’t care. Tears continue to fall, more for the feelings he didn’t share or maybe doesn’t feel.

“Hey?”

I jerk my head to stare at the man who barked to get my attention. “What?”

“Stop. Getting all worked up isn’t good for you. You have to trust me.”

I nod. What can I say? I trust him, but I wish I knew where this whole thing between us was going.

RORIC

It’s three in the morning when we pull into a diner off Interstate ten in Baton Rouge. The thud of the tires riding over the curb jars Rosa awake.

“Sorry, babe. I should have woken you when we got off the highway. We’ll grab some food.”

She scrapes at her eyes and reaches for the bottle of water in the center drink holder, taking a swig. “What is it with you and random diners?”

I shrug. “I like diners. People don’t stick out, and no one will be looking for us. We’re just a couple grabbing a meal on our travels.”

“Sure. But I have to pee.”

I park the SUV, setting up a camera on the dash and at the back window to keep an eye on the restaurant and the parking lot. There is a police cruiser parked at the space nearest the entrance. I stroll around the SUV and help Rosa get out. I pull her hoodie up over her head and tuck her brown hair under the edges. She really resembles the images of Snow White. Maybe we should dye her hair blonde?

The sign at the door tells us to seat ourselves, and we grab a booth at the rear exit closest to our SUV. The server hands us two paper placemats as menus. “I’ll be back in a few with coffee, water, and to take your order.”

The officers sitting at the counter offer a cursory glance at us before returning to their conversation.

Rosa taps her shorter, unpolished finger nail at the menu. “Whatever breakfast item tickles you, you’ll find on this menu.” Her eyes scan the restaurant. Various black and white photos adorn the walls. Oil wells, cattle, waterways, fish, and various birds give us a quick tutorial about life in Southern Louisiana. There are three other occupied tables, and a second server hovering around the counter. I can see a back room hiding behind a partially open door in the back of the diner, along the far walls. The hair prickles on the back of my neck as the server returns with the beverages.

An officer laughs with the other server at the counter as the doorbell jingles with two bikers strolling in. Shit.

Rosa’s eyes follow the tatted, leather-jacketed men as they grab a table by the door. “Could they...”

I give her a look to end her question. Snagging my phone off the table, I check the cameras. “We need to go.”

Fear crosses her beautiful features as she moves to exit the booth. “I still need to pee.”

“Go. I’ll cover you, and I’ll meet you at the back door.” She’s got new luggage and all new clothes. How the hell did they find her? My little voice answers. Maybe it’s a coincidence, and they aren’t here for her.

She slips around me into the small hallway. The officer who laughed at the counter studies the bikers as they try to look casual while perusing the patrons. My cameras clock a third biker arriving in the parking lot and my adrenaline spikes. Time to go. I open the bathroom door as Rosa steps out. I pull her around me and through the side door when the front door jingles again.

“They’re looking for me, huh?”

“Can’t take the chance. Let’s move.” Through the side door and around the front, we skirt the building and climb into the driver’s side door of the SUV. Rosa climbs over the center console to take the passenger seat as I start the engine, keeping the lights off as I pull us out of the parking lot. Onto the road, I hustle to get us back on the interstate.

“How the fuck do they keep finding me?”

“I can’t figure that out. I wondered if someone GPS chipped you, but I’ve seen every inch of your body, and there isn’t a scar. It wasn’t like they were expecting you. Maybe the cartel has hired every biker gang they can find. What if we left without them figuring out who you are?”

She smiles. “Could that really be true?”

“Not sure. Could be I jumped the gun.” Softening my facial expression, I need to help

her relax. “I know you need food. I’ll find us some food before we get to New Orleans.”

“We’re still going there?”

“Yeah. We’ll stay in New Orleans until the day after tomorrow, get to North Carolina in a couple of days, and take the coast route back to New York. We’ll go slow through small towns, so it’ll take us a week to get there safely.”

“A week?”

“We’re going to be safe, baby.”

ROSA

I'm so tired of cheap motels and crappy food. Rory assures me one more night, and we'll be back in New York. The mirror shows me how different I've become. My hair is now blonde. I dyed it before we left New Orleans. I'm split between wanting for this journey to be over and never wanting to leave it. The fates have to be laughing their asses off because I love him. I can't help it. My heart clenches at the thought of losing him. His soft breathing as he sleeps on the bed brings me back to the present. My body is wonderfully sore and sated from phenomenal sex.

"You're watching me again."

"Of course, I am. It's my third favorite thing to do."

He props up his body, resting on his elbow. "What's number one?"

"You know what's number one." Before I can stop giggling, he shifts me under him and enters my wet pussy in one easy motion.

"I'll never stop wanting you."

"That's a good thing because I'm always going to want you. Make love to me Rory."

His gentle hands grasp my ass and hold me as he pumps my pussy with his hard cock. The sensations overwhelm me as he rubs my clit with every stroke. Moments fly by as I lose track of time and space as I'm lost in the pleasure.

“Come for me!” He plays my body like a Stratovarius, using his cock to make my heart sing with pleasure. I don’t know how much time passes until my body soars into a life-altering orgasm. I forget myself as I cry out. “I love you.”

Rory continues to give me everything his magnificent cock has to offer, pumping in and out as he climbs the climax cliff. He didn’t react to my outburst, and embarrassment embraces my soul. I’m screwed. I’m sure I’m pregnant. He didn’t ask about birth control, and I haven’t shared. Emotions swirl my soul as he cries out.

Damn. No exclamation of love as he climbs off the bed. Before he gets back, I’m on my feet, ready to enter the bathroom as he strolls out. Slipping by him, I turn on the shower and pee while he stands in the doorway with a frown.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m fine. You’re not the relationship kind of guy. I get it.” Stepping into the shower, I will myself to hold back the tears brimming in my eyes.

Turning off the shower, I step out to Rory’s thoughtful eyes. “Let me dry you.”

“I can...”

“No.” He focuses on me as I comply. “We need to talk.”

“We don’t.”

“Damn it. You will just do what I want.”

I pull the ends of the towel from his hands and wrap it around myself, taking a pose. “Look. I shouldn’t have told you. It’s obvious that this isn’t what you had intended. I get that. Once we get to New York, I’ll figure out a way to handle my family. Who knows, maybe the Russians might want the information I have for protection.”

Rory tightens his jaw while crossing his arms. "I'm protecting you."

My heart can't take any more, so I turn to leave the little bathroom. His hand grabs my upper arm, turning me into his hard chest. "Just let me go."

"Never!" He lifts my chin to take my mouth in a sensual kiss, exploring with his tongue as his hand slips under the top of the towel, dropping it to the floor. "I want you." He stares into my eyes. "I didn't want any relationship, but you matter to me. I'm unsure what the future will bring, but you're mine."

I can't argue because he's carrying me to the double bed to ravish me again.

RORIC

The Lincoln Tunnel runs under the Hudson River. My heart picks up speed as my palms dampen. It's only a mile and a half; you can do it. It's the same mantra I chant in my head whenever I go through this. The fear started in my childhood when we ran from a shooting at my brother's birthday party. The actual shooting didn't seem to register as much as being in a dark SUV racing into a tunnel. It took forever to get through the mile and a half. I'm so lucky that my mother understood and walked me through it whenever we came this way. My father, the Pakhan of our bratva, wasn't so patient. His idea of mastering your fears was total immersion. He had a closet built in the basement of our home, just to 'help me with my fear.' I shudder. I thought a lot about killing in that room.

"What's wrong?" Her hand grazes my arm. Guilt and resentment bubble up. I haven't been able to brush away her feelings the way I want. Papa will kill me for getting involved with a cartel princess.

"I just want to get you somewhere safe and talk to Fingers about what he found on the drive." Her head pivots to look out the window at the concrete walls as I steady

my nerves to get through the last hundred feet.

We pull into the parking area for the apartment complex on east Sixtieth Street off Third Avenue. A small gasp brings my attention to Rosa. “I didn’t think I’d be back in New York.”

“It’s safe. We’ll stay here. Fingers arranged it, so there is no way anyone is going to find us.”

“If you say so.”

Twenty minutes later, a knock on the door lets me know our takeout food has arrived. Rosa’s face lights up when she sees the bags. I beam at her. “You know Donna Margherita?”

“Duh. Food from Donna Margherita is to die for.” She rummages through the bag and sets the food out on the table, turning her attention to the pizza box. “I love their pizza.”

“I love their meatball panini. I’ve missed this.”

Rosa finishes her fourth piece of Napoletana pizza and leans back in her chair. “This makes up for the slop we’ve eaten lately.”

“It’ll be better.”

“I hope so.” Rosa’s warm pink cheeks decolor into a beigey-green as her hand thrusts up to her mouth. She bolts to the back of the apartment, throwing open a door. The slam gets me moving faster. She’s emptying out her stomach into the toilet as she tries to keep her hair back.

“Let me.” I run my hand through her hair and hold it gently at the back. I reach for the small hand towel and hand it to her when she leans back on her heels.

“Oh. God. You saw that.”

“You’re sick. I’m here.” I scoop her gently from the floor and place her on the edge of the counter, grabbing a clean washcloth to moisten. “Wipe your face.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened.”

“Everyone gets sick. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

She drops her feet to the floor as she turns to turn on the faucet, cupping water in her hand, she takes a drink and spits it out. “I don’t know why I got sick.” She’s unstable on her feet when she turns to face me, so I collect her in my arms again.

“Let’s get you settled.” She rests her head against my chest. Did she eat something earlier when we stopped for breakfast that could have made her sick? I set her down on the sofa in the living room and place a blanket over her lap. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Could I have some of the soda?”

I jog over to the table to grab the white Styrofoam cup and adjust the straw. “Here.”

She sips the beverage as she leans against the back. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop. You can’t control that. We just need to make sure you feel better.”

Her eyes close and I take the cup so it doesn’t fall and spill. The little danger voice in the back of my mind that alerts me to trouble ticks like a clock. We’re safe here...

This apartment is a Bravikov Bratva safe house. It's recently remodeled with simple colors and comfortable furniture. My father believes extravagance is just for him, so his decorator did the bare minimum on this twelve-hundred square foot place. The lack of a view from the window flicks at my dislike of closed spaces. I wish this place had more glass, like Cynric's former penthouse, a few blocks away. My mind wanders to my older brother and his pregnant wife. I could have abandoned Rosa once I determined she wasn't a threat to my brother, but something made me stay. It was that same something I found with her in Prague.

An hour later, texting my youngest brother and flipping through the streaming platform to find something to watch as Rosa's eyes ping open. "I fell asleep."

I chuckle. "Was that a question or a fact?"

"Neither, I guess. I'm sorry."

I move to her and kneel. "The next time you apologize for no reason, I'll spank your ass."

"Um." A smile rises from the corner of her mouth. "Promises, promises."

"As soon as you can keep a meal down, game on!"

Her head snaps to the fridge. "Any leftover pizza?"

"Do you want it heated?"

"Nah. I love cold pizza."

I chuckle. "Me, too. I'll grab two plates and the pie."

Rosa nibbles the second piece of pizza with stops in between bites. “Waiting for your stomach to roll again?”

“Yeah. It seems fine, though.” She dabs the napkin to her lips. “You were saying something about an activity once I ate.”

“Let’s see if your stomach cooperates, then we’ll talk.”

An hour later, I’m sitting on the sofa, bored, watching a series on Netflix as Rosa stands to strip off her clothes. My cock is rock hard and pushing against my shorts as she dances around, moving side to side, pulling off her bra. It lands atop her shirt as she plays with the waistband on her drawstring pants. She lowers a side so I can see her hip, then giggles and pulls it up again. She’s driving me crazy. My hands itch to possess her as they thrust out to capture her and bring her to my mouth. Her skin is soft and warm. My hands brush her pants and panties down in one move, leaving her naked before me. I can only imagine the lust on my face as she offers a half-smile.

“You’re stunning.”

Chewing on her bottom lip, she shifts to drop to her knees as I stand quickly, catching her movements and scooping her up in my arms. “Hey?”

“We need to lie down and take this slow.”

“I’m fine, Rory...” I cut her off as I hustle to the bedroom. “You don’t always have to be in charge.”

“Ha. I’m always in charge and don’t you forget it.” I chuckle as I toss her gently onto the bed to stand before her. “Undress me.”

Lust sparkles in her eyes as her hands rush to my athletic shorts. In a fast move, she’s

shoved down my shorts and briefs and caressed my cock and balls.

“Tsk, tsk. No touching until I say so.”

Her big eyes fill with amusement as I rip off my own shirt. “I thought you said...” She can’t finish her statement before I’m on her. Pushing her knees up, I’m dying to be inside her. Her breath catches as my cock enters her pussy. “Ohhh.”

“Take me.”

She shifts her ass to angle her pussy to meet my thrusts. “Oh. Rory.”

“That’s it. You’re going to cry out my name when you come.”

ROSA

A phone rings, startling me awake, as I roll over. The nausea I've felt for the last week and a half should hit at any moment. Rory has his family doctor coming over later this morning to check me out. I wonder if I'll ever actually meet his family?

"Hello? Uh. Yeah. One second." He presses the mute button on his phone. "I have to go out."

Panic flairs on my face. "But?"

"I promise." He leans over and kisses my forehead. "No one is going to hurt you."

Dread pushes up the bile I feel gurgling in my throat as I nod. "Are you showering before you go?"

He hops out of bed and strolls to his dresser. "My shower last night is all I need." He waves his arm to the bathroom. "Feel free."

I will myself to hold it together as I stand. "What about your doctor?"

"Oh. He texted. He'll be here in an hour. You'll like him. He's a nice old guy."

"Okay. Sure." I pad into the bathroom to pee and shower.

Setting the plate in the sink, I glance around the apartment. It's much less extravagant than what I am used to. But a great improvement to the cheap motels we stayed in

over the last few weeks. A knock sends a bolt of dread through my body. Looking through the peephole, there's an older white-haired guy staring at the door. I open the door to his smiling face.

"Hello." His accent is very Russian which makes my heart skip a beat. "I'm Dr. Kovalev. You must be Rosa?"

"Yes. Please come in. Rory should be back soon."

"No worries. He mentioned you've been sick to your stomach."

We walk into the kitchen as he sets his bag on the end of the counter. "Would you like some coffee or juice?"

"No. Thank you. Tell me about your symptoms."

"I've been nauseous for the past week or so. I thought it was food poisoning."

The man nods. "Are you throwing up all day?"

"No. I throw up in the mornings and sometimes in the late afternoon. It's like my stomach has butterflies in it."

He reaches for his bag. "Could you be pregnant?"

Chewing on my lip, I drop my gaze. "Maybe."

"That would explain your symptoms." He pulls out a white box with a pink border. "Go pee on the stick and we'll see."

I take the box from his hand and trudge to the bathroom. Will Rory be mad? Blowing

out my breath, I read the directions and do what it says. A few minutes later, I walk out with the stick in my hand and the box in the other. “It says I’m pregnant.”

Dr. Kovalev smiles from my kitchen sink. He’s been rinsing my dishes to put into the dishwasher. “Well, that solves the mystery. I’ll write down the vitamins you need to take and text Rory the name of an OB/GYN here in Manhattan.”

I’m staring at the man as the nausea peaks. Turning, I run back to the bathroom and empty my stomach for the second time today.

He strolls in and pulls a washcloth off the counter, running it under water. “Here.” He helps me to stand as I take the cloth. “You’re worried about what he’s going to do about your pregnancy?”

Nodding, I lean into the sink to rinse my mouth. “Yeah.”

“Rory is an interesting man. I’ve known him all his life. This will make him happy. His father, eh? Probably not, but it’ll be okay.”

The way the man talks about Rory and his family gives me comfort. Maybe he’s right.

The front door opens, and I bound out expecting to see Rory. My father’s uncle, Arturo, and my father’s brother, Marco, stand in the living room with Cheshire cat grins.

“What the fuck?”

Dr. Kovalev steps up behind me muttering in a foreign language I recognize as Russian. He switches to English. “Mr. Aguilar. Why are you here?”

“We’re her family. We’ve come to take her home.”

I race around the doctor to get into the master bedroom to lock the door. I have no way to contact Rory. They’re going to kill me. I rush to the bathroom door as the bedroom door splinters from the jamb. Arturo and my Uncle Marco step into the room and move in to corner me.

“It’s time for you to stop running. We have the flash drive. This is over now.”

I stop and cross my arms, glaring in defiance at Uncle Marco. “I’m not going with you. Where is Rory?”

A sadistic smile covers his face as my Uncle Arturo chuckles. “Wait. You fell for the assassin?”

“What are you talking about?”

“He’s the Russian we sent to find you and bring you back.”

“What?” The old man hovers at the door, cringing at his words. My heart sinks. “He knows you’re taking me?”

“Of course he knows, you stupid bitch. Did you think he was going to keep you, and you’d live happily ever after like a fucking fairy tale?”

The doctor moves into the room. “This isn’t necessary. I’ll take her to the estate, and we’ll work this all out.”

Uncle Arturo pulls a gun and points it at the man. “We’re taking her now. It would be a shame for the Bravikovs to lose their favorite doctor.”

“Bravikov?”

Arturo nods. “Ding ding. You’re not as dumb as you look. The man who murdered your father sent his assassin brother to bring you to us. It was an agreement.” He opens the dresser drawer and pulls out clothes and throws them on the bed. “Get dressed for travel. We’re leaving.”

“But?” I stare at the doctor as he avoids my eyes. “Is it true?”

He nods. “Roric’s father sent him to get you and kill you if necessary. They needed to protect Cynric and the bratva.”

“Oh...” My entire world crashes around my heart. My unborn child and I are going to die at the hands of my family or worse. What happens when you traffic a woman and the buyer finds out she’s pregnant?

Arturo screams with spit coming out of his mouth. “Get ready. We’re leaving.”

I grab the clothes off the bed and put them on over the shorts and t-shirt I’m wearing. The socks seem too loose, but I slip them on my feet as someone hands me my tennis shoes. Everything that’s happened over the last few months is a complete blur. He fucking lied to me. I never actually meant anything to him.

Arturo’s hand wraps around my upper arm as he drags me from the room. “You fucking stole from us.” His grip tightens as we go out the door. “Stupid bitch.”

I turn to make a comment as his hand slams across my face. Blackness surrounds my vision as I fall to the ground...

RORIC

Stepping into my father's foyer, I rush past the soldier guarding his study. Pushing open the door, I bark at my father sitting behind his beloved antique desk. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Roric? When did you become the pakhan?"

"I'm not the pakhan, but I'm not your bitch either. Why was I summoned by a lower-level bratva soldier?"

"I was busy." My father smirks from his seat. "It appears you've become attached to the cartel bitch."

"Her name is Rosa. She's not a threat to us. She gave us the flash drive. Surely there is stuff on there to help us with the Aguilar's."

"We got what we needed from the drive and gave it back to them."

"What?" My neck hairs stand straight out as my mind processes his words. "Why did you give it back?"

"Leverage. They know we have everything on the drive. This will keep them in line."

"I disagree, but you're the boss. So, Rosa's not in any danger anymore?"

"No. They're taking her home, and what they do with her is none of our business."

"The hell it isn't. She's mine."

"What do you mean, 'she's yours'?"

"I married her. They can't have her." I'll marry her tomorrow and pretend it was

before.

“Well, fuck. They already do.”

Blood rushes into my brain and muffles the words coming out of my father’s mouth. I bolt from his study and dash to my SUV. “Fuck!” How the fuck did this happen?

Thirty minutes later, I run into the apartment. Dr. Kovalev, my father’s doctor, a man we fondly call the dentist because he lost his license years ago, sits at the counter. “They took her.”

“No fucking way.” I slam my fist into the wall and create a large crater with drywall pieces flying to the floor. “When did they leave?”

“Ten minutes ago.”

I pivot to leave as he calls my name. “She’s pregnant.”

“What?” A wrecking ball hits me in the stomach as my mind wraps around his words. “Pregnant?”

Nodding he holds up a piece of white plastic. “Pregnant.”

“Fuck!” An imaginary video of Rosa round with my child and a child babbling in her arms play through my head. “A baby.” Reaching for the edge of the counter, I steady myself. “Fuck. She’s carrying my child. I need her back.” I grab my phone out of my pocket, pressing buttons until my oldest brother, Cynric, answers. “I need you and the rest of the brothers. My wife is missing.”

“Wife? When? Who did you marry?”

“The woman who witnessed you killing that prick. I married her. She’s pregnant. I want her back.”

Cynric growls. “Well, fuck. Papa gave her to Arturo.”

“Yes. I want her back.”

“Give me a couple minutes.”

I’m staring at my phone and our dentist fidgets next to me. “What?”

“You need to know something.”

“Okay. What?” Anticipation bubbles to my brain remembering he was here because she’s sick. “Oh God, is she okay?”

“They hit her.” His words echo through the apartment, taking on a life of their own in my head. Dialing my father, he answers.

“Roric?”

“I know you’re not happy about my choice of woman, but you should know the dentist confirmed she’s pregnant with my child. They hit her, Papa.”

A string of Russian swear words stream out of my father’s mouth, making me smile. He’ll move heaven and earth to find her now. My mother will haunt him from the afterlife if anything happens to a grandchild. “We’ll get her. Fuck!” The call ends.

It takes my father less than five minutes to call me back. “The Aguilar won’t give her back. They said she’s promised to some sheikh.”

“What the fuck does that mean? Wait. They’re selling her. Over my dead body. I’ll kill every fucking one of them. I’ll cover everything in Aguilar blood.” My phone vibrates. “It’s Cynric.”

“Take his call.”

I answer Cynric. “She’s pregnant.”

“That makes this easier, I suppose. They’re taking her out of the city in a half hour. Apparently, they offered her to someone willing to pay top dollar for her. They actually advertised her as ‘Snow White’. Can you believe that? I’ve texted everyone the address. Fingers is working on tracing phones, now.”

“I’m on the move. Who’s with me?”

The doctor grabs his bag and moves towards the door. “I’m coming.”

“You don’t want to be there. I’m going to kill people.”

He guffaws. “I don’t care about them. I care about your woman and your child.”

Nodding, I rush through the door.

ROSA

The sickening smell of my great uncle's cologne fills my nostrils as I wake up moaning. My face and jaw ache. My hand instinctively moves to my belly, but I remember in time to stop myself. I can't let them know. How long have we been driving away from Rory's?

"You're awake. Good."

"How long have I been asleep? Where are you taking me?"

He leers from the front passenger seat. "I chloroformed you once we took you. I'm doing what your father was too weak to do."

I stare at the man who's going to sell me. He told my father hundreds of times to do it. He wanted my father to sell my mother, too, but her family knows powerful people in Texas, and she hid behind them.

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to the airport. You've been fucking the Russian, so I know you're not a virgin, but you're a model and beautiful, so we found a sheikh who wants you."

I push myself up into a seated position, just in time to notice the under-water tunnel Rory and I went through when we got here. We're heading to New Jersey.

The cartel soldier driving the SUV clicks his tongue as he looks at my face. "Damn,

that's a bruise. The sheikh will see that at the airport and know she's been broken in."

He and Arturo laugh like hyenas.

Okay, so I'm going there instead of some man coming here. Does that increase or decrease my chance at getting away?

"Have you figured it all out yet?"

"What?"

"The Russian was playing you. He brought you back to me."

My mind races through the time we spent together looking for opportunities for Rory to have contacted my family. Fear, desperation, and sadness war in my heart and head. How do I get out of this?

"You might as well accept your fate. Be a little slut, and maybe he'll keep you. You're pretty enough."

The driver speaks to Arturo. "We're going to be at Morristown Airport in ten minutes."

"Excellent."

Adrenaline spikes in my body as my mind races for how to get out of the car. If I get on that plane, I can't get off until we land. "Is it a straight flight or will we stop for fuel?"

Arturo's brow lifts. "Glad you're accepting this. It will make it easier." He smirks like a monkey in a zoo that's just picked up a piece of fruit. "We'll stop at Heathrow

in London and refuel. It's a long trip, nearly fifteen hours, so you'll want to rest."

Can I get away when we stop in London? "I don't have my passport."

"You don't need it. You won't leave the plane."

The driver brings the SUV to a stop next to the private airport parking. There's three other cartel vehicles waiting for us. He gets out of his door and walks to the back driver's door and pulls it open. "Get out."

Arturo chuckles as he walks to the back of the SUV when one of his other soldiers is holding his luggage. "Don't hit her face."

I extend my legs out of the back seat as the driver grabs and jerks my arm. "Hey."

His hand swings and catches me in the side of the head. Stars fill my sight as I stumble to stand.

"Damn it." My uncle growls. "Not her face."

"Sorry, Jefe."

'Jefe.' Arturo gets a kick out of everyone calling him boss. He'd be upset if he knew men use the term 'boss' with everyone, like bud or bro. Assholes. I raise my head as six large, black SUVs speed into the airport. Arturo grabs me and propels me into the closest hangar. "You should stay close. Our enemies have found us."

"Who found you?"

He pushes me through a door into an office and takes out his phone. He barks orders in Spanish as I move to the window to peer out. Rory's family has arrived. "Why are

the Bravikovs here?”

He flips his hand to me like you'd do to a buzzing fly. The window shows me more than a dozen men surrounding the hangar. Arturo's phone rings.

“Hello? No. Because she belongs to me. Married. You're telling me your son married this slut?” He lowers the phone and asks. “Are you married?”

“Yes.” Make it convincing. If Rory is saying we're married. Go with it. “He married me.”

“Fuck.” He puts his phone back to his mouth. “I've already sold her.” He walks around me to glance outside. “Tell your men to stand down.”

Cartel soldiers take positions to hold off Rory's group. Movement catches my eye. Rory and two other men come around the corner of the hangar. Rory's hand flashes a blade that slices through the soldier's throat. Blood squirts and hits the wall. The man crumples to the ground. Methodically the three men cut through the dozen cartel soldiers to come around the other part of the building, closest to the door.

“Call off your men, Mikhail.”

Who's Mikhail? Is he the pakhan? My father talked about a ruthless pakhan. Could that be Rory's father? More questions than answers swirl around my mind. Why is Rory here?

Someone throws open the door, as the driver of Arturo's SUV flies in to grab me, placing a gun to my head. Rory enters the office with two men that look very similar. “Let her go and I'll let you live.”

“Ha. So, you're the assassin?”

Why does everyone keep calling him that?

Rory winks at me. “I’ll kill you and your boss if you don’t drop the gun and let her go. I don’t want you or him.” His eyes flick to Arturo. “She’s my wife, and you aren’t taking her.”

Arturo purses his lips. “Pay me ten million for her.”

“I’m not paying you anything. She’s mine.” He barrels at me and the man holding me as another man grabs Arturo. The blade presses against my neck as liquid runs down, wetting my shirt. Rory’s hand knocks away the knife as his other hand moves quickly across the driver’s throat. Warm liquid covers my head and back.

“Roric. Fuck man. She’s covered in blood.” One of the other men announces with disgust.

Rory grabs me from the floor and carries me out of the office. The kind doctor approaches as I realize Rory is yelling with panic in his voice. “Help her.”

“Set her on the table. Is this her blood?”

“Some of it. The guy cut her neck.”

Cloths scrape at my neck as the old doctor peruses me. “It’s not a deep cut. She needs to get this other blood off her, though.” His head pivots to the other man that came in with Rory. “Find her clothes.” The man runs off to the SUVs.

“Oh God, Rosa. Are you okay?” Roric takes my hand and grits his teeth.

Reality snacks me upside the head, making my face and head hurt again. “No. You lied. From the very beginning, you planned to give me to the men who wanted to kill

me. Leave me alone.”

A man who looks like Rory, just grayer, walks up to me. “Are you okay?”

“No. Do I look like I’m okay?”

“I apologize. I’m your new father.”

“You’re his father?” I point to Rory.

“Yes. And you are now my daughter, and the child you carry is my new grandchild.”

“I’m not staying here. You and your family gave me to my family so they could kill me or sell me to the highest bidder. Which they did. My child and I are leaving.”

His head nods. “Well, right now, you’re going with the doctor so he can check you. We’ll discuss the future after you’ve had a little time to calm down.”

The doctor, or dentist, as he was called, pats my arm. He’s holding a stack of clothes. “Let’s find you something clean to wear.” He leads me through another door into an office.

Nodding, I see the door to the private bathroom as Roric moves to follow. The doctor clears his throat and stares at Rory until he stops his feet. The man shakes his head. “No.” The doctor moves ahead and holds open the door.

Stepping into the bathroom, my eyes catch my reflection in the mirror. I look like Carrie from the movie. Blood covers my neck, shirt, hair, back, and down my pants to my white shoes that now look like a Jackson Pollack painting. “Wow, that’s a lot of blood.”

The doctor pushes open a door at the back of the restroom. “Here’s a shower.”

Debate rages in my brain and the side for cleanliness wins. I take the clothes from his hand and enter the shower room. It looks like a standard hotel shower. Must be for the flight crews. There are containers of shampoo, body wash, and conditioner on the wall. Stripping off the bloody clothes, I step under the warm water. Please, just wash off this horrible day.

Ten minutes later, I step out into the shower room in a large beige towel. Dr. Kovalev leans against the counter with his stethoscope around his neck. “How are you feeling?”

His question gives me pause. Physically, I feel okay. Emotionally, I feel like I’ve been on a four-hour roller-coaster ride, which ended with a ton of bricks landing on me. Fatigue fills my body and my soul. “I need to eat and sleep.” My head jerks to the door.

“No one is going to walk in.” He removes the stethoscope from his neck. “May I listen to your heart?”

“Sure. It’s broken.”

He nods as he approaches. “I can only imagine. Tell me what happened after you left with your uncles?”

“Arturo hit me in the face and I passed out. I woke up in the back of an SUV. He said something about chloroform. I don’t think anyone touched me, beyond putting me in the back, but they aren’t honorable, so who knows?”

“I’m sorry.” The sadness on the man’s face makes me feel worse. “I’d like to schedule you in to see an OB.”

“Okay.”

The door handle jiggles, and Dr. Kovalev storms to the door we walked through, growling in Russian. He jerks open the door and barks a few words, turns, and walks back to me. “Sorry about that. Roric is impatient.”

“Fuck.” I grit my teeth and hold my eyes closed. “What happens now?”

He blows out his breath. “You’re not going to like the next part of this adventure. But it will keep you and your child safe from your family.”

“But what’s going to keep me safe from Roric and his?”

He pats my arm and leads me to the door. “Roric loves you.”

I wrench my arm out of his hand to stand akimbo with a salty look on my face. “No. He doesn’t.”

“He does.” His voice is soft full of concern and regret. He opens the door to a pacing Roric and men that look just like him. “Get dressed.” He pushes the door closed.

Roric reaches for the knob as the doctor moves his hand, barking in Russian.

I lean against the door and put on my new clothes. Stepping out, Roric rushes toward me.

“Thank fuck.” He moves toward me as I throw my palm up to stop him.

“No. You don’t get to bother me.”

“I’m sorry, Rosa. I should have handled all of this better, but this is where we are,

and I suggest you get on board.”

“Get on board! Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Heads snap around the area. “Rosa.”

“Don’t alpha me with your tone. You’re a liar. I’ll never trust you again.”

An older version of Roric strolls up. He oozes power. I’ll bet there isn’t anyone who tells this man ‘no.’

“Welcome to the family.”

“What?” Anger and frustration crash into my mind, resting on my shoulders as I process his words.

“You’re married to my son. Your child is my grandchild. You’re part of our family.”

The glare from Roric keeps my mouth shut. Married. He told them he married me. I’m not marrying him, but if his family needs to think that, then so be it. I nod at the man, turning my head to Roric. His hand stretches out to wrap around my arm. “We need to talk.”

“That’s the understatement of the century.”

We walk outside the hangar, maneuvering around the bodies and blood. He holds open the rear passenger door so I can climb inside, refusing his outstretched hand. He gets in behind me as the driver puts the car in gear to drive us away from the airport.

We drive onto the expressway. I can hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears.

Roric asks. "What do you want to eat?"

"I don't care."

"Sure, you do. Just eat before we meet the judge to get married."

"Why the fuck would I marry you? I hate you."

"You don't. You're angry and hurt. I'll explain everything, but we need you to be my wife. No one can touch you if you're in my family."

"I need a phone."

That surprises him. His brow lifts while his jaw hangs open. "Why?"

"I want to call my family in Texas. I realized when I was being trafficked that my family has connections. Pure stupidity to not go to them in the first place."

"Why didn't you?"

"I forgot my grandparents know powerful people. I don't need you or your family."

"We can go see your family after we get married."

My hand whips out and across his handsome face. "Fuck you. I'm not marrying you. My baby and I are leaving." I turn as he extends his arm to grab me around the waist. "Stop!"

"Fuck you."

He pulls me across his lap and pops my ass with his hand. "Stop!"

The vehicle moves into the tunnel as I skitter off his lap, moving against the window. “Don’t fucking touch me!”

He throws his hands up in surrender and faces me. “Marry me in name only. I’ll agree to anything you want, but you’ll have my name and my protection.”

I stifle a hysterical laugh as the driver stares through the rearview. “Your protection. Fuck you. You gave me to them. You lured me in with all your swagger and lies just to hand me over to them so they could sell me to some other rich dude.” My eyes focus on his with a glare like my mother when she’s pissed. “I assume you’re rich.”

“Well, uh. That’s beside the point.”

“Is it though? You just assume that everything you do is great. My feelings meant nothing. My welfare and the health of my baby mean nothing. You’re an entitled prick, and I’ll never trust you again.” My arms tighten as I cross them across my chest. “Give me a phone, and I’ll call my grandparents. They’ll get me to Dallas.”

“No!” His hand scrapes across his head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know my father arranged for your uncles to get you. I never would have allowed that. I told my father we were married hours ago. I want to marry you. You’re mine.”

“Well, if this is how you treat things that are yours, it’s obvious why you’re alone.”

The driver scoffs in the front seat as Roric growls. “Fuck you, Saxon.” He motions to the man snickering in the front. “That’s my youngest brother. I’m going to kill him when we stop.”

“Maybe he’ll kill you, and my troubles will all be over.”

Roric scowls. “Fine. Marry me, and I’ll take you to Dallas myself.”

“Ugh. I’m not marrying you.”

The SUV slams to a stop and two men rush to each side of our vehicle. Roric rolls down his window. “What’s going on?”

“The cartel is at the estate. They want to see her.” His finger points at me, and my anxiety peaks. “Marco is demanding to speak to her. He doesn’t believe you’re married. He says she belongs to the family.”

Roric’s head swings to me with a shit-eating grin. “Told you.”

“Fine. On paper only. It means nothing to me.” I readjust myself on the seat and stare out the window watching the happy people interacting in the cars around us as his brother puts the SUV in gear.

Lost in thought and starving, Roric opens my door. I don’t recognize the underground garage. A set of four black SUVs, three motorcycles, and a half dozen sport cars line up along the wall. Roric’s hand points across me. “That’s my Vette. We’ll take it out when we get back from Dallas.”

The elevator plays music like an expensive hotel. When it opens, a man surveils us as we walk out. He nods to Roric. “Mr. Bravikov.”

Roric offers an almost imperceptible head bob as he unlocks the door with a code. He steps in and motions for me to walk past. “The judge will be here in the morning. There are new clothes and the things you like in the first bedroom to the right. I’ll order your favorites.” I gawk at him. He’s so calm. I open my mouth to argue as he kisses my forehead. “We can fight after you’ve eaten.”

I trudge through the open floor plan, stopping to notice the abstract painting in the living room. It’s large brushstrokes of primary colors with a woman’s image centered

within the colors. It's striking. I gasp as he walks up behind me.

"My mother."

"She's stunning."

"Yeah. You remind me of her."

My head whips around. "Do you really think this charm is going to change anything?"

"Nope. I regret lying to you, but I didn't know you."

"You certainly knew me while we were running. I'm exactly who I seem to be. You on the other hand, I don't know." I turn to face him. "And I don't want to." I pivot on my heel, moving quickly down the hall.

RORIC

"Fuck!" The door closes with a bit more slam than I hoped for. Stupid, stupid. What did my mother say? Stupid is as stupid does. She'll never forgive me, and how do I blame her? Her image with my child in her arms haunts my brain. I never expected to find someone. My mother told us all we'd find the woman of our hearts. Thane and Cynric did, and I just thought I was too evil with too many souls on my register.

My cell rings. "Hello?"

"It's Isabella. I want to meet her."

"No. She hates me. Let us just get together on Sunday like we planned. You'll get to meet both of the new women of the family in one night."

A baby fusses in the background. “How is my nephew?”

“Hungry. Cynric said she’s pregnant.”

“Yeah. She needs an appointment with an OB. Got any pull to get us in tomorrow?”

“I’ll make a call and let you know what time. Make sure she has a dress, flowers, and a friend.”

“A friend?”

“Yes. Fingers said her friend from Phoenix is in New York. Bring her to the wedding. If we can’t come, at least give her someone she cares about.”

“I’ll text him.”

“Good boy. Be easy, Roric, or I’ll help your girl poison you.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?”

“Yep. Mothers have to stick together.” She hangs up, and my ears detect the sounds of a shower. Food. Order food.

Twenty minutes later, she strolls out in a velour pantsuit. I double take because she looks like a supermodel in high end clothing.

ROSA

“I’m hungry.”

“I got all your favorites.” He swings his hand across a large wood dining table. “I’ll

serve you.”

I’ve rolled my eyes so much today, they feel tired. Hell, I’m exhausted. “Got milk?”

“Wasn’t that an ad for dairy products?”

“Seriously. Talk less.”

He nods as he walks to the gourmet kitchen. It’s my first chance to take in the opulence of the apartment. He has a navy-blue leather sectional with the biggest television I’ve ever seen overlooking the room. He closes the refrigerator as I turn to catch his eyes. “Why do you have such an incredible kitchen? Got a maid?”

“No. I have a cleaning service. I like to cook when I have a chance.”

Snorting in disbelief, I sit down at the table. He’s set out two plates and serving spoons. The aroma of the Italian food is scrumptious. Lasagna, manicotti, chicken Parmesan, and Italian wedding soup catch my eye.

Roric hands me a bowl. “I saw you looking at the soup. Here’s a ladle.”

The fragrant broth sloshes into the deep navy bowl. His dishes match the sofa. Ah. He had a designer. The first bite of lasagna explodes on my tongue. “Thanks.” His beaming smile pings my heart. “Is there somewhere I can eat that I don’t have to see you?”

Shock pops on his face. “Watch it baby. You can be pissed at me but nastiness doesn’t suit you.”

It’s not worth wasting my energy arguing with the man. He won’t be the first man I’ve ignored.

My eyes are puffy and my face is red. Crying instead of sleeping is a poor way to take care of myself. It's eight in the morning and the gleaming luxury shower beckons me.

"Rosa?" Roric taps on the door a second time as he calls my name.

I get back into bed, rolling over to take the covers. Just ignore him. I locked the door.

The door opens as I turn to pull the covers to my chin. "What the fuck? Get out."

"I'm sorry, baby. The judge is due here in an hour. I have someone to help you get ready coming in twenty minutes, so you might want to shower."

"What do you mean help me dress?"

"It's a surprise. You'll like it. Clothes were delivered already."

"Roric, I have clothes. The closet is full."

He scrapes his foot on the carpet and raises his head to make eye contact. "You need a wedding dress."

I sit up as the blankets fall to the bed, exposing my thin chemise. "Get out!"

He can't take his eyes off my body. "Just get in the shower."

"Fine." I bolt for the bathroom. "Asshole!"

While I was showering, he pushed in a rack of pretty dresses. There must be twenty of them from the top designers. I shake my now freshly blow-dried hair. "This is not what I planned for my wedding."

A voice startles me from the doorway. “Well, I’m here.”

Melanie stands outside the door with a large bag and an older woman behind her. “We’re here to help.”

A tear falls down my cheek as she strolls to me. “It can’t be that bad. He’s loaded.”

I sniffle. “Money isn’t everything.”

She cocks her hip to stand akimbo. “I disagree. A good sugar daddy is perfect.”

The other woman comes closer. “I’m Magdalena. I’ve known Roric and his family since he was a child.”

“Why are you here?”

“I’m good at this. You aren’t the first wayward future spouse I’ve dressed for an event. Trust me.”

“That well has dried and collapsed. I don’t think I’ll ever trust anyone again.”

“Pfft.” She rummages in her bag and sets out hair and makeup products on the dresser. “Let’s choose a dress.” She nods at Melanie, who fingers through the dresses.

“Ooh.” Melanie pulls a champagne-colored dress with an embroidered bodice. “One to try.”

“I guess it’s fine.”

Magdalena, who looks old enough to be my grandmother, frowns. “You might as well get onboard this marriage train. The Bravikov men are stubborn. He’s picked

you. You are his.”

Her words hang in the air like the smell of wet dog. He doesn’t hit me. He’s better than my uncles.

Melanie squeals. “These two are Vera Wang gowns. You have to try these.”

“Okay.”

Magdalena dips her head at my body. “Just try them on here. It’s faster.” My head jolts to the door as she pats my arm. “He won’t come in. He knows better.”

Forty-five minutes later, I’m standing in front of the ornate fireplace with Roric, in front of an older gentleman in a black robe. He holds his bible in his hand. “Good morning.”

Melanie beams at the man. “Good morning, your honor.”

Suck up.

He smiles one of those fake smiles. “I’m here to marry you.” He glances at Magdalena, who winks back at the man. Obviously, they know each other.

I cock my head, holding a small bouquet of roses with baby’s breath in a pale lavender dress and white satin shoes. “Are you really a judge?”

He laughs with his eyes lighting up. “Yes.” He fumbles on the side of his robe and pulls out his wallet. Handing me his license, he nods to Roric. “Search my name.”

Roric takes out his phone and hands it to me. I search the man’s name and his photo pops up with a caption: Federal district judge retires. I hand Roric his phone and nod

to the judge. “Fine.”

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to marry Roric and Rosa.” He dips his head to Roric. “Do you Roric take Rosa to be your wedded wife?”

“I do.” He stares at me like I’m a cupcake, and he’s been on a diet for months.

The judge pivots to me. “Do you, Rosa, take Roric to be your wedded husband?”

I chew on my lip as the judge stands motionless. Thoughts jumble around my brain. I could just walk out. My uncle’s face flashes before my eyes as I nod. “Yes. I mean, I do.”

“Excellent. Where are the rings?”

Roric pulls out two velvet boxes from his suit pocket and hands me one. “Here.” I flip open the top to find a simple men’s platinum band.

The judge motions to Roric. “The ring.”

Roric places a massive solitaire on my finger. The stone sits in a flower setting with platinum petals so it looks like a rose. Oohs and ahhs echo from the women around the room. He leans in. “I know you don’t trust me, but I love you. I won’t disappoint you again.”

“Whatever.” I scoff as I shove the ring on his finger.

The judge smirks as he announces. “You’re married.”

Roric gently kisses my lips as Melanie squeals and claps like a trained seal. “Yay!” She pulls me into her embrace. “Your guy must be rich. He got a judge to waive the

waiting period, and that ring. Wow!”

“Yeah. I’m lucky.” Sarcasm drips from my words, but she’s too shallow to notice. I miss my mother. She should have been here.

Roric hands me a computer tablet, and my mother’s face appears on the screen. “Congratulations.”

“Mama.”

“Roric explained. We’ll have a reception in a few days to celebrate. I can’t wait to see you. I’m grateful to your new husband for keeping you safe.”

Anger gurgles in the pit of my stomach. Safe indeed. His smile annoys me further as I turn my attention back to my mother.

ROSA

Nine hours later, we pull onto a drive leading under a building, into a garage. Roric parks next to the elevator and walks around my side, though I've already opened my door. I refold my arms and grit my teeth as his hand wraps around my waist. "You don't need to touch me."

"I'm going to touch you. You're mine. I would have thought that ring on your finger clued you in."

I mumble, "fuck you," as he swings his head to offer his killer smile. Shit.

A little while later, we arrive at a condo penthouse door with two men standing on both sides of the double door. It opens to a white-haired woman with an apron and an infant on her shoulder at the door. "Roric?" She smiles and casts her eyes to me. I can only imagine what she's heard about me. Her face shifts to a concerned frown. "Hi. I'm Mrs. Belova. Cynric and Isabella are in the living room." We step inside a home. The floor to ceiling glass gives a spectacular view of the city. It's breath-taking. A slight woman with beautiful red hair steps around a long sectional with a rough-looking, scarred man on her heels.

"Oh." All eyes move to me with curious stares. It's the man that murdered my father. He nods as we approach. "Hi. I'm Rosa."

Her hand extends. "I'm Isabella." She motions for me to follow. "I hope you're hungry. Oh. That's Cynric. Ignore the frown. I do."

My stomach grumbles at just that moment, raising my blush.

She leans in. “Mrs. Belova is a phenomenal cook. She’s made a huge spread.” Our walk ends at an expansive dining room and a large, light wood table with twelve chairs. Eight sets of eyes scrutinize me.

I feel like a rabbit who’s been spotted by a pack of wolves. The only woman seated is a stunning dark redhead with a pregnant belly. The man sitting next to her could be Roric’s twin. His arm lays over her seat, and she’s basking in his attention. He kisses her head and whispers something to make her blush. My stomach rolls. I want that. My little voice answers with a smug lilt, telling me I could have that if I wasn’t so damn stubborn.

The redhead waves. “Hi. I’m Scarlet.” She motions to the brother next to her. “This is Thane.”

I nod. “Rosa.”

“Oh, I know. We’ve heard all about you. Welcome.”

The baby fusses in the other room before Isabella can sit. “Sorry. He’s hungry.”

Roric’s father, who has sat silent like a gargoyle, speaks. “He’s always hungry.”

His voice startles me as Roric leads me to a seat across the table from the beautiful couple and sits down next to me. “Relax.”

His voice grates on my nerves. It’s been three days since we got married, and I’m still pissed. Tomorrow we’re leaving for Texas. I’m hoping the change of location will give me a chance to get out of this marriage of convenience.

Cynric sits at the far end of the table. “While my wife is attending to our son, I’ll make introductions. On my left is my youngest brother, Saxon. Next to him is Scarlet, then Thane. On the other side of him is Dr. Kovalev. Taking up the spot before our pakhan is the only non-family enforcer at the table, Nicolai. My father sits at the head of the table, like he does without family.” The older man nods. He’s as tatted as his sons, but with longer hair pulled back in a leather tie. Cynric continues. “Fingers sits next to Papa with Wystan, my fourth brother on his left. Roric, my third brother and his wife, Rosa, complete our dozen.”

Roric stretches his arm around my chair. “I can help you if you forget who everyone is.”

I roll my eyes, catching his father’s smirk. “When do you two leave for Texas?”

Roric straightens in his seat. “Tomorrow morning.”

His father nods. “Why Dallas?”

I interrupt Roric. “My grandparents live in Dallas.”

The imposing man purses his lips, and the other table conversations end. “Why didn’t you go to them when Arturo was pursuing you?”

“I didn’t want to bring trouble to them. I should have asked for help.”

“Family is always there for you when you need help. You’re part of our family now. You and my grandchild.”

Did his words veil a threat, or am I just paranoid? I can’t dwell on the answer as Isabella comes to the table with a baby nursing at her breast. She sits down next to her man as he squeezes her hand. It’s obvious the brothers love their women. My

heart aches to go back in time.

RORIC

I stroke my cock up and down, finishing my less-than-stellar orgasm. Fuck. I didn't expect to spend my wedding night alone in my king-sized bed, but this is night number three and my hand isn't doing what I need. I grab the shower wand off the wall. Who can blame my new bride? I fucked up, and I'll be lucky if she ever comes to my bed. I rinse off the mess with the shower wand. My hands itch to hold her. We're seeing the doctor for a pregnancy check before we catch our flight.

A half hour into the appointment, after blood and urine tests, the technician enters the room. "Hi. I'm Sydney. We're going to do a vaginal ultrasound to check on the pregnancy." She motions at Rosa. "Skooch down to the end of the table." She gloves her hands and lifts the long, cylindrical transducer from the machine and slides on a plastic sleeve.

My mind wanders to the shower and my feeble attempt to find release as the tech asks Rosa questions. My attention returns to the moment, as the tech gasps. "Well. There's two."

"Two?" I pivot my gaze to the screen as she points.

"Baby One. Baby Two."

"Shit." I can't help the beaming smile that fills my face. "Oh. Wow."

I kiss Rosa's forehead as she studies the screen. "Does everything look okay?"

The tech nods. "The doctor is seeing the images in real time. She'll come in and talk to you as soon as I finish my scan."

Sydney removes the plastic cover from the transducer and sets it in the holder as the door opens. The female doctor my sister-in-law knows steps into the room. She sits down on the stool. “Twins.” She beams. “Everything looks good. We’re going to see you a little more often than we would if you were pregnant with just one.” She stares at the two of us. I’m sure she’s used to shock, but I’m overwhelmed.

Squeezing Rosa’s hand, I nod at the doctor. “Is there anything we need to do?”

Shaking her head, she focuses on us. “No. No restrictions.” She nods to Rosa. “Eat multiple small meals during the day and get more rest than you typically do. Don’t start any new activities without clearing it with me.” She purses her lips. “Questions?”

We both shake our heads as she stands. “Congratulations.”

Rosa puts on her panties and pants as I gawk at the photos of pregnancy stages on the wall. I slip my hand behind her back. “Thank you.”

A half-smile lifts on the corner of her mouth before she flicks her head in a silent acknowledgment. She’s still angry.

The drive to the airport is silent. I’m so excited and scared. Rosa’s in a trance, offering an occasional smile as she types away on the new cell phone I gave her, and I just can’t bring myself to risk pissing her off by breaking the silence.

Six hours later, the plane touches down at the Dallas/Fort Worth airport. Rosa slept most of the journey. We disembark the first-class section of the plane as I hike the carryon onto my shoulder. Rosa objects to my hand touching her, so I flex my hand to control the itch to spank her. Fingers rented us an SUV from a company, so we’ll grab our luggage, acquire the rental, and head to her grandparents’ home.

“Thank you for bringing me back here.”

I’m floored by her comment. “Of course. I’ll do anything to make you happy.”

She snorts. “Let me go.”

“Anything but that. You’re mine. Eventually you’ll forgive me, and we’ll have a great life together with lots of kids.”

Her grandparents own a small estate on the north edge of Dallas. The brick drive reminds me of the brick walkways in New Orleans. It’s nowhere as extravagant as my father’s, but it has an Olympic-size pool, tennis courts, and a massive building to the side. “What’s that?”

“A garage. My grandfather likes cars.”

“Who doesn’t?” I mutter to myself. The front door opens, and two older, well-dressed people stand with beaming smiles as another woman runs for the SUV. That must be her mother. She’s dressed in loose-fitting dark clothes with wisps of hair easing out of the hair bun. She’s not the well-manicured, perfectly dressed woman I expected to see. “Go. I’ll get the stuff.”

Rosa bolts out the door and runs into her mother’s embrace. Her grandparents hasten their pace to greet her with a giant family hug. I grab our stuff out of the back and stand like a bellman waiting for the embrace to end.

Her grandfather raises his head, dimming his smile as he extends his hand. “I’m Jackson White.”

“Roric Bravikov.”

He nods. "My wife Rosalita and our daughter, Raquel."

"Hello. It's nice to meet you. Rosa has missed you."

Rosa's head snaps to me. "Don't speak for me."

Gasps echo around us as her grandfather snickers. "That one's got a temper. You and I will have to talk about how to smooth those rough edges."

"I enjoy those rough edges."

The corners of Jackson's mouth raise higher. "That's convenient." He grabs Rosa and places her under his arm. "That's not the kind of attitude you show in public. You know better."

"But..."

"But nothing. He's your husband. I expect you to respect him." Chuckling, he adds. "In public at least."

Shaking my head, Rosa's mother tucks her head and murmurs. "Thank you for bringing her to me."

"You're welcome." I bend down to whisper. "Any sign of the cartel?"

She doesn't answer, but her father responds.

"No. Marco is in charge now, and he's steadier in his behavior. He might even appreciate Arturo's demise." I cringe as he puts his hand on my shoulder. "You protected Rosa. No one will hold anything against you."

I murmur. “She does.”

“She’s stubborn. This marriage is the best for her. She’s pregnant and babies need a father.”

Babies. Ah, my wife must have texted her family about the babies. At least she’s sharing it with someone. Raquel moves along with Rosa down the path. How did the dowdy wall flower make my blooming wife?

The interior of the house reminds me of when my mother decorated my father’s estate. Warm colors, photos on the wall, and soft rugs cover the expansive Saltillo tile. Jackson leads our entourage upstairs, making a left at the landing. “This is the South wing. It will be yours whenever you visit.”

Rosa scoffs. “He won’t be coming back.”

In a scoldy, school teacher tone, her grandmother speaks. “Rosa. Don’t be rude.”

She bows her head as the door opens to a large suite. A large four-sectioned painting adorns the wall. Pastel colors with Rosa’s image in each square show a smiling, happy woman. My heart clenches when I look at the annoyance on my wife’s face. She turns to her grandmother. “We need two beds. Please ask Mrs. Martin to set up another room.”

Her grandmother’s face drops the sweet look she’s had since we arrived. She nods to me and takes Rosa by the arm. “We’ll be back. Please make yourself comfortable. Mrs. Martin can unpack your bags if you wish.”

I shake my head and move further into the room. I strain to hear the unhappy voices in the hallway.

“He’s your husband.”

“He forced me to marry him.”

“That man saved you from your father’s family. He married you to keep you safe and give your baby a father. He seems pleased that you’re having more than one. And in case you haven’t noticed, he loves you.”

“You’re crazy.” Her tone raises in pitch to almost a whine.

“Regardless. You will not be getting another room. You’re married. Sleep with your husband.”

Rosa stomps to her bag and unzips it. She avoids my eyes and mumbles under her breath. The door opens as Jackson pokes his head in. “Like cars?”

“Love them. Rosa mentioned you have a stable of cars.”

“Join me.” His tone reminds me of my father’s as I hustle to meet him on the stairs.

“How’s Rosa?”

“Pissed.”

“What’d you do?”

“I kept who I was from her while we were running from her uncles.”

“Ha! That’ll do it. Any reason why?”

“Her family made me think she was one thing, and I found out she is completely different.”

“Rachel and Rosalie plan to throw a party this weekend. Are you okay with that?”

“That sounds awesome. I regret not being able to give Rosa more.”

“Huh. The rock on her finger seems like a lot.”

“That’s only monetary. I wish I could have given her the wedding of her dreams; I just didn’t have time. The marriage needed to happen. It’s all about control with her family’s cartel.”

“Don’t I know it. What do you know about Corvettes, young man?”

“I own one. Do you have one?”

The older man chuckles. “I have three.”

“Lead the way.”

ROSA

My grandfather walks Roric down the path to his garage. I don’t quite understand why my family seems hell bent on choosing him. I scan the estate through the window, bombarded with memories of the past.

“Rosa?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Come meet us in the kitchen.”

I step out of the room as my mother leans against the top banister overlooking the

first-floor great room. “I’m hungry.”

“Well, of course you are. Mrs. Martin has your favorites.”

“Great.” I slip my hand in hers to walk down the stairs. “Everyone is being really nice to Roric.”

“He’s your husband.”

“Not for long, if I have anything to say about it.”

She stops us on the stairs. “Rosalie Rachel, you need to grow up. This is life. We make choices to better our situation. You modeled to get away from your father and increase your profile so he couldn’t take you. Marrying a rich man from a powerful family gives you protection from your enemies, and knowing your father’s family like I do, they won’t just decide to leave you alone.”

I shrug as we continue down the stairs. “He lied to me.”

“Men lie. But does he hurt you?”

“Only my pride and my heart.”

“I don’t think we’re talking about the same man. That man who brought you to your family is the right man for you.” She sighs. “You don’t want people to look at you like a failure because you’re alone with children. People can be so cruel.”

“Is that why you hide in Mexico?”

Her gasp makes me sad that I asked her. “Everyone here found out who your father was and shunned me. Your grandparents stood by me, but many of their friends

dropped them. And your grandfather was a powerful financial advisor to the Dallas rich, and my connection to the cartel put a cloud over him, too. I left because my choice shouldn't hurt those around me."

We step into the kitchen. Various platters of foods pepper the counter as Mrs. Martin smiles. She rushes to me, pulling me from my mother. "Welcome home, honey."

Tears well up in my eyes as her hug tightens around me. "Thanks." I wipe my eyes and blow out my breath as I sit down.

"Here's a plate. Dig in."

Four bites into my chimichanga, I look up to see everyone staring at me. "What?"

My grandmother beams. "You're having twins. How exciting."

My hand stops moving while I cock my head. "I wasn't sure Mama told you."

"Of course, she told me. I was with her when she read your texts. Now let's talk about a reception."

"What reception?" I continue eating my favorite entrée as my mother sits down next to me..

"A wedding reception this weekend to celebrate you and Roric."

"Why would I want to celebrate that?"

The kitchen phone on the wall rings. Mrs. Martin answers, and the color drains from her face. "No. I'm sorry she's not here." There's a pause as she implores my grandmother to stand.

My grandmother takes the phone from Mrs. Martin. “Hello?” She gestures to my mother, who texts my grandfather. “Marco, you are not welcome. Rosa and her husband are visiting.” She rolls her eyes. “Security won’t let you enter the property. You can try.” She hangs up the phone with a hard slam. “Asshole.”

A few minutes later, my grandfather and Roric enter the kitchen. Grandfather goes to his wife, and Roric comes to me. He asks. “What happened?”

My grandmother hugs him. “Marco called. He wants to come see Rosa. I told him security won’t let him on the property.”

My grandfather nods. “I need to make a call.” He steps out of the room as Roric holds me against him.

“Are you okay?”

“I guess. I thought he wasn’t going to bother us now that we’re married. But now I realize, he’s going to always cause us trouble.”

“I’m sure Marco wants to make sure we actually are married. Your grandfather mentioned a party. We’ll have photos done and offer them to the society page. That should settle this.”

His scent is a balm on my soul. I’m still angry, but he’s comforting. Am I really that weak? Breaking free from his grasp, I dig back into my lunch. I motion. “You should eat.”

He scans the counter as Mrs. Martin hands him a plate. “Thank you.” He scoops portions of various dishes onto his plate and takes the seat next to mine.

A few minutes later, my grandfather steps back into the kitchen. “I called Banner

Campbell. His company, CPSP, will handle security for the party.”

Roric cocks his head. “Maybe we should step up security while we’re here.”

My grandfather nods. “They’re sending men to do just that.”

RORIC

We've been in Dallas for two days. Light streams into the room through the edges of the blinds as my eyes focus. The room has a massive bathroom, a sitting room and a den. Rosa's family has accepted me whole-heartedly, like I've always been one of them. The security guys have the property well in hand in case Marco or his thugs try to breach. Rosa breathes softly in my arms. She's wearing sweats again, but navigated herself back into my arms in the night. She may not want to accept we're married, but her body knows. Later this morning, she's headed out with her mother to get her hair fixed. I'll be happy for the blonde hair to go. Maybe I should go with them for added security.

"You can let me go."

I nuzzle her neck. "Never. Look where you're sleeping. You moved back to my side of the bed."

She pulls away. "Whatever."

I reluctantly let her slip from my grasp. She gets up, and I call out to her. "Don't you think it's time to forgive me?"

"Have you apologized?"

I bound out of bed, entering the bathroom before she can close the door. "I have. I am sorry for not telling you who I was. I apologize for your uncles taking you. I regret not telling you sooner that you matter to me. I was wrong." Dropping to my knees, I

take her hands in mine. “I love you. You love me, too. I know it.”

She wrenches her hands from mine. “Whether or not I love you is a moot point. You lied.”

“Yes. I lied. I will do my best to never lie to you again. You have to give me a second chance.”

She turns and strips off the sweats as my cock flies to attention, bobbing against my abdomen.

She points. “Fat chance.”

Shaking my head, I step out of the bathroom to call my father.

Later in the afternoon, Rosa and her entourage of women giggle in the first-floor guest room. Her grandmother arranged for dresses with accessories for the party, and they’re all choosing what to wear for our reception Saturday night.

Jackson approaches. “Want to go to town to get a suit?”

“Yeah. I guess I should.” We walk past Banner, who’s sitting on the wraparound front porch, chatting with another man. He extends his hand. “Everything on the property is secure.”

Jackson smiles. “Excellent. Thank you, Banner. Have you met my grandson-in-law?”

I nod. “Roric.”

Banner shakes my hand and asks Jackson. “You two heading out?”

“We’ll be back soon.”

He motions for me to get into his 1967 Corvette L88. My tongue hangs out of my mouth. This car is worth millions, and he just drives it around Dallas. “Aren’t you afraid someone will scratch this?”

“Oh, it’s been scratched. I’ve repaired the body work a couple times. But I bought this off the showroom floor, so it’s always been mine.”

The drive to downtown is pretty quiet. Is this guy saving up to pounce on me with questions when we stop? He pulls in front of a Mister Tuxedo in Snider Plaza. The salesman greets us at the door, welcoming Jackson by name. He motions for us to follow into the store. “Do you know which type of tuxedo you want?”

“Yes.”

“I have Tom Ford, Giorgio Armani, Vera Wang, and Prada, just to name a few.” He looks me up and down. “Forty-two long with thirty-four waist and thirty-four length.”

“Armani.” I flick my head to Jackson, who sits down on a very uncomfortable-looking bench. “There’s a coffee shop nearby. Go grab a coffee and come back in a half hour. No reason for you to sit here.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” He taps the clerk on his shoulder. “Put the tux on my account.”

I open my mouth to argue, and he shakes his head. “It’s not right to argue with your in-laws, young man.”

Twenty minutes later, I step up to the counter with my purchases hanging on the adjacent rack as the door chime rings. I expect to see Jackson, but Marco walks in with two of his goons. Handing the clerk my credit card, I glare at Marco. “Marco.”

“Roric.” His eyes scan the room. “No wife?”

“She’s at her grandparents. But I assume you know that.”

He shrugs as his two soldiers begin their trek through the store.

“I would have thought you’d have a tux.”

“Her grandparents are throwing us a reception. But you know that.”

“Yes. You should invite me.”

“It’s not my place to invite you to the White family home.”

“She’s my niece.”

“And my wife. Husband trumps uncle.”

“You’re going to be sorry you brought her to her mother’s family. They’ll try to keep her.”

“Goodbye Marco.”

He turns into Jackson’s angry gaze. “Making trouble, Marco?”

Marco laughs as he exits.

The clerk’s hand shakes as he hands me my card. I pocket it as Jackson sighs. “I told you I was paying.”

“Next time.”

“Ha. Just because you can afford to buy doesn’t mean you can’t accept my offer.”

“True. I’m used to paying for things. Rosa will want for nothing.”

He nods as he grabs my bags. “I already knew that when you got out of the SUV.”

ROSA

The kitchen door opens to two laughing men. My grandfather has his hand on my new husband like they’re bosom buddies. Seriously. My friends, my mother, and my grandmother spent the afternoon convincing me that Roric is a good guy and worthy of a second chance. The smile he offers when he sees me dampens my panties. It’s more than being horny. He’s been perfect since he rescued me.

He saunters up and kisses my head. “Good evening, ladies. Did you all have a good afternoon?”

I nod. “Katrina Petrov, my friend from high school, along with Camille and Ella Campbell were over helping to choose dresses.”

“How do you know them?”

“I met them through Katrina. They’re married to Banner’s cousins.”

“That’s nice, baby. I’m glad you have friends visiting. You’re welcome to invite them to New York anytime.”

His offer surprises me. Would they come if I invited them? I’ll have to ask at the party.

A little later, we sit around the dining table. Mrs. Martin’s corned beef dinner reminds me of my childhood when we stayed here. Conversations bounce around the room like we’ve always been together.

Roric answers my mother. “My mother made corned beef every Saint Patrick’s Day. She was British with an Irish grandmother.”

“She’s gone?”

“Yes. She died a while ago.”

I get up to clear the table with Roric as he asks. “Take a walk after?”

“Sure.”

We’re walking around the grounds. I point to the tennis court. “Do you play?”

“No. Do you?”

“Yeah. I was pretty good, too. My father forbade me to play in school, but Mama got me lessons. My tennis instructor is the one who suggested I model.”

Roric reaches up and touches the ends of my hair. “I’m so glad your hair is dark again.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Don’t get me wrong. You were beautiful with brown or blonde hair, but I love it best with its natural color.”

His compliment seems so genuine. Goosebumps rise on my arms as he wraps his arms around me.

“Let’s get back. You’re cold.”

Nodding, we head into the house.

My mother smiles at us from the sofa. “Did you enjoy your walk?”

Nodding, I yawn. “We’re heading upstairs.”

We’re silent as we use the bathroom to get ready for bed. I stare at Roric lying against the headrest messing on his phone. “What?”

“Nothing.” I turn the light off on my side of the bed and climb under the covers. I’m wearing panties and a t-shirt because the sweats at night are too warm. “Don’t take my change in clothing as an invitation.”

The corner lifts on his beautiful mouth as he pulls the covers over me. “Sleep well, baby.”

His words continue to break through the concrete walls around my heart. The heat from his body beckons me to back up against him, but I force myself to move to my stomach to sleep.

I’m running down a dark street with dark figures chasing me. Bile sits at the top of my throat as I run around a corner. It’s a dead end. Please save me. Please save me. The mantra repeats in my head. A hand touches my shoulder as I cry out.

“Rosa. Sweetheart. You’re okay.”

I startle out of the nightmare. Roric rubs his hand down my bare shoulder, around the silky straps of the camisole. “Oh, God.” Without thinking, I roll over and curl myself into his arms, sobbing.

“Tell me about the dream.” He continues to brush his gentle fingers across my skin. The feeling is magical.

I babble about running and bad guys. “I’ve never been so scared.”

“Shhh. I’m sorry. You’re here with me.”

A big part of me wants to pull away, but I snuggle in. Just for tonight.

RORIC

Tomorrow is the party. Raised voices echo from the front porch as I step off the stairs heading to the kitchen. I change course and open the door to my growling father and Banner Campbell.

Banner grits his teeth. “You’re the pakhan of a bratva; no better than the Aguilers.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. We don’t do what they do.”

Pulling the door, I move forward. “Stop!”

Both eyes flick to me with my father smirking. “We were just getting acquainted. I just came for the party.”

“Ha.” It’s never simple with the pakhan. “I invited you with the expectation you’d get along. What the fuck is going on out here?”

He flicks his hand toward Banner. “We were discussing Marco and his group. I suggested we just hunt them down and bury them in the desert. This is Texas. Bodies all over the place.”

Rolling my eyes, I motion for the two to follow me off the porch. “First, Marco isn’t a threat. Banner has the security well in hand. Two. This party is for my pregnant wife.”

Banner’s head jerks around to me. “Pregnant. That’s fast.”

I smirk. “Russian.” Poking Banner is going to be fun. Fingers did some research. There’s a family relationship between his best friend, Maxim Petrov and the Campbells. Maxim’s father has a reputation as an assassin that puts mine to shame.

His quick laugh makes me like him even more. He faces my father. “I’m prepared for Marco Aguilar. He’s a sex-trafficking, drug smuggling, murdering asshole, and I’m hoping he gives me a reason to shoot him.” His smile lifts. “This is Texas, after all.”

We both laugh as Jackson strolls up behind us. He extends his hand to my father. “Good afternoon. You must be Mikhail.”

He nods. “I am. Thank you for the invitation to celebrate.”

“You and your family are always welcome.”

My father takes the man’s arm to lead him back to the house. “You and your wife should come to New York. My treat.” The two laugh.

Banner blows out a breath. “Bravikov Bratva here in Dallas.” His words carry a weight that reminds me of who I am.

“He’s worried that Marco will try to take Rosa, and I’ll kill him.”

“You have a reputation for that.” My eyebrow raises as Banner nods. “Can’t find anyone who died by your hand that didn’t deserve it.” He clicks his tongue, and I wait for the news he’s about to share. “My grandfather, the former Vice President, Angus Campbell, will be attending with many other Campbells. You’ll be outnumbered.”

The party just got more exciting. I chuckle to myself as I walk away to find my bride.

Walking through their house, I listen to the playful banter between my father and Rosa’s mother. They’re sitting around the large kitchen table drinking sweet tea. My

father, the Bravikov Pakhan, drinks sweet tea? He looks up and ticks his head at me. “It’s a good thing I brought my tuxedo. Apparently even Angus Campbell is attending.”

“So, I heard.” I sit down next to Rosa and run my fingers down her arm, eliciting a smile. “What’s Mrs. Martin making for dinner tonight?”

Raquel answers. “Another favorite of Rosa’s: chicken fried chicken.”

Rosa leans against my body as she takes in the flirting between our parents. I haven’t seen my father flirt with a woman since my mother died. My father swipes Raquel’s lock of hair behind her ear, eliciting a blush. Can’t say this has happened since my mother. He only uses random women for sex, and that’s about all.

Rosa whispers. “I think I’ll go lie down.”

“I’ll walk you up.”

She smiles. It’s the kind of smile she offered to me while we ran from her uncles. Maybe she’s thawing. I stand to help her up as approving glances show around the table. She kisses her mother’s cheek. “I’ll be back for dinner. I’m just tired.”

Swinging open the bedroom door as we rush through, Rosa turns to run her hands under my shirt. “Take it off.” The lust on her face is heady. She kicks off her shoes and drops her capris, glancing up at me. “Pants off. Take it all off.”

Nodding, I take off my shoes and shed my shirt, unbuttoning my pants as she moves to the center of the bed. My tongue hangs out. She’s stunning. I stop at the side of the bed as my cock stands at full attention. “You’re beautiful.”

“Thanks.” Cocking her head, she motions to the bed. “Fuck me.”

Thoughts swirl in my head. I'd love nothing more than to fuck her hard and make her mine again, but this needs to be more sensual. She has to know I love her. I stretch out next to her and rub my fingertips along her leg. I kiss her thigh while she shakes her head.

"Get to it."

"Since when do you tell me what to do in bed, wife?"

She starts to move. "If you aren't interested..."

I grasp her arm and pull her back to me to take her mouth. Her gasp gives my tongue the perfect avenue to plunder. My hand roams behind her neck to hold her exactly where I want her. She's perfect. Moaning as I kiss her, wanting to give her my love as well as my possession. My other hand reaches up to caress the side of her breast. Her hand reaches down to stroke the length of my cock. Up and down, mimicking the rhythm of my tongue as pleasure shoots from the bottom of my toes to the head of my cock rolling through me. Breaking the kiss, I blurt out. "I need you."

"You're not the only one."

I shift to kiss her stomach, making her cry out as I slide my hand down her torso, settling at the apex of her mound. Her clit is barely peeking out of the hood, and my thumb strums across.

"Oh. Yes."

Bending my two fingers, I ease them into her heat. Her head thrashes back and forth. I know she needs relief and giving it to her is paramount in my mind.

She cries out. "Fuck me with your cock. I want to feel you."

Her desire is all I need. I roll her onto her back and rise on my knees, gently pressing my palms to the insides of her thighs to spread her. I can smell her, and the smell is intoxicating. She wants my cock. Doubt tickles the edges of my brain. Should we talk first?

She flicks my nipple. “You tell me to stop thinking. So, you stop. I want you. I’ve forgiven you. Sometime this week I stopped being mad at you. I don’t agree with what you did, and if you lie to me again, I’ll cut your balls off.”

That’s enough. There will be things I won’t share, but I won’t lie to her. The silent promise echoes in my mind as I center my cock along her slit and press into her pussy. “Should I be more gentle?”

“God, no. I need you to fuck me.”

“Mm. I’ll do that later.” I slow my pace with long strokes, hitting her g-spot. “Right now, I’m going to love you.”

She gasps as she meets my rhythm. The slow, gentle, long strokes cause her fingers to squeeze the bedding. “Oh...” Her eyes close and the mixture of lust and love on her face humbles me.

“I love you, Rosa. You’re everything to me.”

“Move faster, damn it.”

ROSA

My heart’s racing. I hear myself moan, a throaty, wanton gasp of pleasure that makes Roric smile. My climax is building. His hand edges beneath my ass, increasing his depth, and it feels better than I remembered. I wasn’t lying. I do forgive him. His cock is deep inside me, rocking in and out at a steady pace. I love the way he fills me.

Steady panting from the extreme pleasure makes him smile down at me. Bliss hovers just out of reach. He'll get me there. His ministrations with his fingers work with the movement of his cock, heightening my pleasure. My toes curl as sparks explode in my core. With a scream, I cry out as the pleasure peaks, catapulting me into a life-altering orgasm. Roric bends to kiss me hard to capture my cries in his mouth. His rhythm continues to draw out every drop of pleasure from my climax.

"Oh, God."

"Sir, will do."

I laugh. His sense of humor at all the right times adds to the reasons I love him. "I love you, Sir husband."

"I like that." He adjusts his hand underneath me and leans down slowly stroking his tongue against mine as he climbs his pinnacle to find his own release. He breaks the kiss to raise up on his knees again, pushing my legs farther up to increase his tempo.

His cock feels like heaven. This is exactly where I want to be every night. His thrusts lose their perfect rhythm. He's getting close to coming. My hands move to his ass as I squeeze to spur him on. My pussy quivers as the pleasure builds. He's going to come before I come again and the satisfaction warms my soul. "Come in me."

He possesses me, body and soul as he cries out, filling my pussy. This time I swallow his cries as his cock empties. He shifts to the side and kisses me gently. "Was that okay?"

I know he means for the babies, and it makes me happy how he shows he truly cares. "Everything is fine. I loved it. I love you."

Pulling me towards him, he whispers. "I love you."

“Time for sleep. I need my beauty rest, so I look decent for the party tomorrow.”

“You are always the most beautiful woman in the zip code, baby.”

I laugh. “That’s corny.”

“Corny or not, it’s true. Let’s get you some rest.”

I snuggle into his arms and just as I drift off, my mother’s laughter catches my attention. “Your father is good for my mother.”

“Is he?”

“Yeah. She’s been hiding herself since my father made her feel like such an ugly duckling. But Mikhail seems to make her happy.” Roric’s slow breaths tell me he’s drifted into sleep, and I wonder if my mother will ever be able to find a love like ours.

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Bratva King A Bravikov Bratva Novella by L.B. Burns

He lost the love of his life. She lost all sense of herself. Together, they might find salvation in the most dangerous place of all - his arms.

Mikhail Bravikov is a ruthless pakhan, a widower forged in the fire of heartbreak and hardened by bloodshed. Since the death of his soul mate, he's drowned his grief in one-night stands and violence, ruling his bratva with an iron fist and a frozen heart.

Then Rachel walks into his world.

The discarded wife of a rival, Rachel has spent years hiding her body, her beauty, her fire. But Mikhail sees what others overlook: the glow beneath her scars, the strength behind her silence. And once he decides she's his, nothing will stop him from claiming her.

But in a world where loyalty is bought with blood and betrayal lurks behind every kiss, Rachel must decide if she's strong enough to stand beside a king or risk being crushed by the crown.

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