

Veronique: A short story

Duality

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VERONIQUE: A SHORT STORY

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Angel

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Duality

Veronique: A short story

The first time I saw Death, I was eight. It was a Sunday afternoon. We had spent the weekend with my *Abuela* in La Libertad. We were headed home to our house in Flores, the largest city in the Peten department of Guatemala. There was an accident somewhere ahead on the highway. Traffic was moving at a crawl. I knelt on the back seat of our sedan and studied people in the cars around us. In the lane nearest to me, a man with shoulder-length blond curls played air drums on the steering wheel of his old Army-style jeep. American, probably. He saw me staring and winked and exaggerated his drumming.

He didn't see the commercial truck bearing down. The force of the crash shook our car and others nearby. The sound of metal shrieking against metal blended with human voices screaming and crying as panicked drivers attempted to get out of the way. There was nowhere to go. The truck crushed the back of the old jeep, jamming the blond man into the dashboard. His body was caught between the twisted metal frame of the seat and the steering column. His face pushed through the broken windscreen.

He was still alive. Air bubbles of blood circled his mouth. His eyes were pitch black with pain, his yellow hair soaked red. The air was thick with the scent of coming Death.

In the seat in front of me, Mama cried out and turned away. I rolled down my window so I could get a closer look.



WHEN I WAS TWELVE, my cousins and I played near an outbuilding at our family's compound in the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes mountains. In the main house, the men talked business, and the women discussed 'woman things.' I much preferred be-

ing outside. My cousins, all boys, were at an age where they fancied themselves gangsters-in-training. I found them ridiculous. I wasn't outside because I enjoyed their company; Papa had ordered me out after I repeatedly inserted myself into adult conversations.

The cousins raced through an old stone barn, a place we had been told many times to avoid, which made it all the more fun. They blasted each other with water pistols, making shooting sounds as they ran. I followed slowly, swinging a dull metal sword back and forth as if I were beheading an unseen rival.

The barn had been empty as long as I had been coming here. Dust motes danced in the air where the sun shone through holes in the roof. The horses had been moved to a newer, nicer stable, but there was a lingering perfume of hay, manure, and death.

An angry shout stopped us in our tracks.

Chano, one of my father's men, stood in the center of an empty grain storage room. He wasn't alone. A fat, naked man was bound with rope to a wooden chair. A thick carpet of dry grass burned under the chair, flames licking at the man's bare feet and ankles.

I was hypnotized.

Chano ordered us out as calmly as if he'd caught us eating cookies before dinner.

I raised my eyes to him, although I wanted nothing more than to watch the fire dance. I felt as though I was seeing Chano for the first time. He was attractive, even though he was old – at least thirty. He had sparkling eyes that turned up at the corners and a very nice body, tall and lean, not too muscled.

My heart pounded with excitement.

The cousins, pretending not to be frightened, fled the barn, their *piupiu!* shouts ringing through the empty corridors.

I backed away reluctantly, aware of Chano's eyes on me as I slipped through the doorway into the central hall. Chano returned his attention to the man in the chair and did not see me creep back and peek around the corner.

The flames were caressing the curly hairs on the fat man's legs. The biting sparks had to sting. His skin was bright red where the fire touched, but his bare feet were pressed into the young flames. He must be in agony.

Chano added more kindling. The man in the chair jerked and screamed. The sound was muffled by a gag between his teeth.

I sunk my teeth into my lower lip.

Chano asked the man questions, but I did not care to hear the answers. I was fascinated by the way Chano used pain. He appeared absolutely emotionless as he doled it out and pulled it back, suggesting kindness would be offered in exchange for the information he wanted.

What did he feel as he caused such misery? Did he feel any sorrow? Or was he angry? Or perhaps he felt a tingle of joy as I did?

A fluttering in my belly snaked down between my legs. The feeling was unfamiliar, but it was not unpleasant. As Chano increased the torture of the man in the chair, I moved my thighs against each other under my skirt. When Chano pulled a sharp blade across the man's throat, I felt as if an iceberg had broken loose inside me, and I cried out in pleasure.

Chano spun, eyes wide in surprise. Then they darkened with something I didn't recognize.

I turned and ran.



I DID NOT SEE CHANO more than a few times each year, but I dreamed about him almost nightly.

To most in San Miguel, he was simply a cook. He owned a small restaurant popular with the tourists that came to explore the mountains.

What he did for my father was a private skill, brought out only on rare occasions.

Chano was only part of our life in the mountains, and visits to the compound were rare during the January to October school year. The rest of the year, my parents and I lived in Flores, a northwest region of Guatemala, near Mexico's border. We only went to the mountain camp on weekends, occasional long holidays, or the two-week summer break.

Papa kept his work as an attorney separate from what went on in the mountain, although, of course, my cousins and I knew what our fathers did, both in public and private. Everyone knew.

When I was fifteen and started secondary school, we went to the mountain for the two-month gap at the end of each school year. I was thrilled. More chances to be close to Chano. I desperately wanted to feel that iceberg break away again.

My Papa was a wise man. He understood that taking care of people, and showing them kindness, was much more effective than commanding with fear. He made sure the villagers had jobs, cars, and money to pay bills. When they were secure, he was secure. Papa only called on Chano when someone dared steal from him, and most knew better than to attempt such foolishness.

I was frustrated. The rare instances when I watched from the shadows were thrilling, but the gaps between were too long. I was addicted; I craved the euphoria I had found in the barn. I learned that receiving pain could be pleasurable, too, but it wasn't the same. Eventually, I had to accept I could never generate the intense feelings I thirsted for on my own, no matter how hard I tried.

Most girls want a gentle lover to take their virginity. I identified the cruelest man in Papa's organization, waited until he was drunk, and provoked him into raping me. His brutality brought mind-blowing release, but even that wasn't as good as what I'd felt watching Chano torture the fat man.

After, my rapist expected me to cower, not rise up like a lioness. He thought I'd be ashamed to tell Papa. Instead, I gave him a smile that made his eye widen. In the months I enjoyed him, I learned much about myself. I enjoy power.



WHEN I WAS NINETEEN, Chano came to the mountain enclave not to punish but to prepare a feast. One of the cousins had earned his law degree and would be joining the family practice. Family, blood and chosen, came together to celebrate.

I hung around the kitchen, watching Chano. When he filleted a fish, was he pretending the knife was gliding through human flesh? When he sliced carrots, did he imagine they were the fingers of some poor soul? When he pierced a leg of meat onto a skewer to roast above an open fire, did the fat man come to mind? I wanted to somehow let him know I saw him, that I understood.

When Rosa, one of the maids, began flirting with Chano, I felt rage like nothing I had known. I did not like being emotionally out of control. Feeling foolish and embarrassed, I pushed between them to exit the room. As I passed, I knocked into the girl with my hip, shoving her into the hot griddle.

My embarrassment was replaced with delight when the maid screamed in pain.

I uttered a quick apology and left the kitchen, forcing myself not to smile until I was out of sight.

This act of petty jealousy had two unexpected outcomes: First, Papa was furious. He'd never been truly angry with me before. He warned my pride and temper would be my downfall. I knew I was supposed to feel remorse and shame. Instead, I felt indifference and the burgeoning bud of an emotion that would soon flower out of control: resentment. I was not his property. He did not own me. I owed him nothing.

The second unexpected outcome was absolutely thrilling. Papa, realizing I did not care about the suffering I had caused, instructed Chano to discipline me. I wondered how dear Papa would feel if he knew the glee that filled me with joyous light at the very idea.

Chano knew.

I made a show of protesting when Chano dragged me to the old barn. I feigned fear when he clipped each of my wrists into cuffs that hung from the ceiling. I produced a whimper when he kicked my legs out from under me. I even offered up cries of terror when he pulled down the bullwhip from the wall and moved behind me.

I had been waiting *so long*. The first lash made me quiver. The second lash made me tense. The third lash made me cry out as I felt the iceberg tear free in my belly.

Chano was furious. He tore my dress from me, thinking direct contact between whip and skin would bring the desired response. Each time leather met flesh, I cried out— in pleasure.

Eventually, recognizing defeat, Chano unchained me.

We never spoke of it.

After graduating secondary school and moving to Universidad to study journalism, I persuaded Papa to give me an apartment of my own.

Despite himself, Chano came when I beckoned. I would call, he would refuse. Then, a few hours later, he'd be in my bed. Together we explored our dark sides. Chano was uneasy with his genius at creating pain; I reveled in it. I would have eagerly traded spots with Chano to possess his skill.



WHEN I WAS TWENTY, everything changed. Papa declared I would marry a man vital to the family's business. Chano knew the man. He was emotionally cruel and physically feeble. He would not be able to meet my needs. Chano swore he could not betray Papa's trust by continuing our relationship once I was married.

When I asked Chano – I would not beg – to go away with me, to discover the world and ourselves, he refused. I accepted his decision. His loss. And his mistake.

Mama and the aunts were over the moon arranging the parties and food and decorations. I'll admit, choosing a wedding

gown was enjoyable; for once, my outer self would reflect the queen I know myself to be. I allowed myself to be the centerpiece in the ridiculously elaborate festivities orchestrated to tell the story Papa wanted to tell.

But I knew I would never be anyone's property.

A week after the marriage, I appeared at the door of Chano's restaurant one last time, as he finished prep work for the next day. As always, he was unable to resist. Once he'd satiated me, full of guilt and self-recrimination, I allowed myself something that had so far only been a fantasy. I studied his handsome face, so angelic in sleep, and his strong, lean body. Then I thrust his fancy 9" fish knife deep into his lower belly and pulled it upward across his smooth abdomen, toward his ribs, not stopping until I hit bone and could move the knife no further. By the time he realized what was happening, it was far too late.

I returned to the dusty old mansion I shared with my husband. In the week we'd been coupled, he'd shown himself to be a sadist, cold and controlling. Mental torment could be fun, but he was predictable and uninteresting. There was no finesse, no mindfuck, just throw a verb barb and hope it hurt. He wasn't worth my time, and he got the end he deserved: swift and indifferent. Which isn't to say I didn't enjoy it.

The third was the most difficult because I did love Papa in my way. If I believed he would not continue to try to control me as long as he was alive, I might have made a different choice. But I knew he would not, could not, leave me to my own destiny. There would be another husband. And another. Because neither of us would change.

I was conflicted. Part of me wished to honor Papa by making his death something that would be talked about for years to

come by people all around the globe. Something so stunning others would try to surpass. Making it quick and relatively painless seemed kinder for him and for Mama. Mama was not capable of running the business by herself. Some man would claim her and attempt to replace Papa as head of the organization. Unacceptable.

Besides, I was anxious to get going. My mind was set, and they were now simply a detail.

In the end, I decided straightforward was best and would give me the time and space I needed to put the rest of my plans in order. I invited my parents to our new home for dinner. I explained my dear husband had taken to his bed with a headache – which was true since it was now removed from his shoulders. I prepared a chicken stew and served it with a simple Sauvignon Blanc. When my parents finished their first glasses, their chins were drooped onto their chests at the dining room table. They would sleep through the rest.

I had packed a bag after dispatching my husband and had put it in the car. I slipped into the garage and changed out of my dress, trading it for jeans and a simple dark sweater with my old high school sneakers for footwear. I had no fear of getting caught. Tonight's actions would cause sufficient confusion to buy the time I needed to cross Mexico and get into the US. No one would suspect the sweet, beautiful daughter. At least, not until it was far too late.

I locked the doors and windows and thanked God for paranoid capos. I kissed each parent's forehead, then returned to the kitchen. I laid the dress on top of the stove and turned on all five gas burners.

I was ready for adventure.



I LEFT THE CAR, CLEAN and stripped of all identifiers, in a Juárez alley behind a bar popular with college kids looking for a weekend of fun. Frat boy Tim was easy to pick up. He and his buddies offered me a ride 'back' to El Paso. Good looks, charmingly accented English, and a professional fake ID removed all barriers.

Tempting though it was, I did not celebrate my newfound freedom by butchering Tim or his friends. It would be best to stay invisible for a while. Chano's death was not newsworthy, but even the US media was reporting on the demise of my husband and my father. When big players in the drug cartels were killed, it was both newsworthy and salacious. There was speculation that I had been abducted by the perpetrators. Perhaps a jealous suitor had taken me before murdering my husband and parents in our newlywed home.

I left El Paso and moved north, recreating myself along the way.

I was no longer Veronique. That girl died in Peten. Now, I was Vero. Just Vero. Like Madonna. One name was more than enough.

It took six months for the authorities to decide the Peten deaths were crime-related and add the case to the stack of other unsolved murders.

There was no further mention of Veronique.



I RENTED A FURNISHED guest house in the King William area of San Antonio. I explained to Joe, the homeowner, that I was a university student, and my father had sent me north with cash. Would it be okay if I paid three months up front? Joe liked the idea of not having to chase down rent or worry about bounced checks. He agreed on the condition I'd water his plants when he was out of town for work two weeks of every month.

Marcus was my first. We met in the bar of the Menger Hotel. He was serious and business-minded, and quiet. We were opposites. I left the Catholic school girl in Mexico and reinvented myself as an exotic, charming, artsy goddess.

Amusingly, Marcus fancied himself a dom. I let him play on our first few dates. But he never got more adventurous than tying me to the bed and tickling me. I was bored our first evening together, but my plans required a bit of time.

A month or so after we began seeing each other, I shyly asked if we could trade places. Marcus was intrigued. He laughed nervously when I cuffed his wrists and ankles to the metal bed frame and blindfolded him with a scarf. Nerves grew to anxiety when I dripped hot wax in a trail from his chest to his groin. When he shouted at me to stop, I shoved wadded panties into his mouth, then covered his mouth with a strip of duct tape.

Joe was out of town. Only the houseplants would know what happened that night.

I spent hours experimenting to test his limits and mine. A fireplace lighter. Clamps. Tweezers. I broke his fingers, one at a time, first with a hammer, then took a wrench to his feet. I carved a pretty flower in his upper thigh with a scalpel. I burned a spade shape onto his belly using a clothes iron. I used a hammer and chisel to create holes in the flesh of his feet. I did anything and

everything I could think of. I had been fantasizing about this and collecting my tools for a long time. Marcus kept passing out, but each new test brought him back and sent him into a new phase of horror and pain.

I did wonder what went through his mind when I finally uncovered his eyes, red from tears, the pupils black with terror. Did he think I had finished? Did he dare believe this meant he would be free? He did not know there were two waterproof mattress pads under the bedding. He could not see the plastic tarps on the floor.

Poor Marcus never understood that when I pulled out my last toy, an electric pruning saw, it was his end and my beginning.



BY THE TIME I MET SHERIFF Jonny Johnson, I had been in the United States for five years. Texas is such a large state I never found the need to leave. I simply moved around – from Austin down to Corpus Christi, then up to Houston, and eventually Dallas. Although I still had a good bit of my initial stash, I made extra money dancing in amateur night contests, slept in cheap motels, and spent a lot of time in dive bars. It wasn't a lifestyle I intended to maintain forever, but for the time being, I was content. This fluidity gave me time and space to hone my skills.

Wichita Falls. I was in an evil mood, ready to do serious damage to whoever crossed me. No reason, really; maybe it was that time of the month. I found myself in a small, darkly lit bar full of chipped pool balls and equally chipped men huddled over the ancient bartop. It was all fun and games at first. A group of beer-bellied stud-wannabes bought me drinks and watched me

bend over the pool table. Then one of the assholes said something stupid, and I lit up like a firecracker.

Sometimes when that happens, I don't remember much. After, I had kaleidoscope visions of smashed beer bottles and a broken pool stick protruding from a fat belly, but I felt calm. The last thing I should have been was calm because I found myself in the back of a sheriff's vehicle. Oddly, I wasn't anxious. I felt... at peace. Safe. Where I was meant to be. Which was peculiar because the man himself, Sheriff Jonny Johnson, said not a word. He just drove through the night.

To our destinies.



WHICH OF US WAS MORE surprised? Him, I would guess. When he strapped me down to his bench and began doing things, I'm sure he expected me to cry and beg and plead for my life... not howl for more. He looked at me in wonder. Was I that good of an actress? Did I think I could sway him? I'm confident it didn't take long to understand I was the real deal, fascinated by the art of pain, just as he was.

That was that. After a week in the barn, he brought me into the house. He came back with another girl. I didn't try to save her; I came up with new ways to humiliate and terrorize. I took her clothes. I put the collar around her neck. I created the recipe for the prey's meals. I took the foundation he laid and intensified it.

If Chano was my love, Jonny was my spirit. We were the same, under the skin. Jonny accepted who he was, made peace with it. I gave him a safe place to embrace his whole self. He wel-

came what he found in me as a lover and a partner. It did not matter he was married. That woman was simply a mask he wore.

I ran through him. I was in his blood.

Until the *putas*.



THE THIRD *puta* burned my Jonny alive. She will pay. *She will pay.*

They thought they had me cornered. I felt no fear. My arm was tight around the dark-haired girl's neck, and my machete blade kissed her skinny belly. The home I made with Jonny kept my back protected as the scrawny boy, and the third *puta* came at me, trying to save their worthless friend.

The third *puta's* asked who hurt me. No one. I hurt others. She asked if my mother did not love me. She loved me too much if anything. She asked if I wanted to fuck Papa. No, silly rabbit, no. None of these inane questions is what finally made my fury boil. It was her repeated use of the name of the girl who no longer exists: Veronique.

The dark-haired *puta* in my grip was no fun. But this new *puta*, this girl who killed my Jonny, her death would be terrible. I will send all who love her to hell.

The scrawny boy raised his gun and took aim. The sting of fire took me by surprise – he did not look like he could successfully wet someone with a garden hose, much less hit an intended target with a weapon. This was not a pain that brought pleasure. I screamed and shoved the dark-haired *puta* from me. That girl stumbled into the scrawny boy, knocking his arm to the side, giving me time to escape into the woods behind the house.

Long ago, just in case, I'd made a small escape hole in the fence. Jonny trusted me. He never suspected I'd cut a small section, just enough to wiggle through. Now, I made my way to it, listening as the sirens – so many sirens – approached from every direction. I could not stay. But I would not forget.



IN THE WEEKS SINCE leaving the ranch, I have learned a lot about Angel Evanston. In a way, I respect her. She reminds me of me: willing to do what is necessary to get what she wants. But what she wanted killed my love, and that is not acceptable.

It wasn't hard to find Angel and her good friend CB, although I'm sure they believe themselves to be well-hidden. Most of their information is kept out of the news, but my journalism studies provided me with the skills I need to research and discover that which is not intended to be easily found.

Like the little house on the patch of land near Pittsboro, North Carolina.

I'm perched on a woody hill opposite across the road from the gated entrance to their land. This is forrest land, owned by the government and maintained as a nature park. No homeowner will yell at me to leave their property. I've been here for an hour. The Nikon binoculars give me a close-up view without requiring me to make my presence known. This is my third visit.

The cottage looks like a Disney princess should live inside with her little woodland friends. It's a cheerful yellow, with a bright blue door and window boxes at the shuttered windows. A botanical moat in the form of a fairyland garden surrounds the house. It was designed strategically. There is no way to access the

windows without leaving apparent evidence, including blood, as a number of the larger shrubs are thorny. The only way to approach the house is through the front and back doors. Both are like landing strips; clear of anything might block someone's view of a visitor.

That freaking pink semi-truck is parked in a large metal-roofed structure to the side of the house. The building has no side walls, just a simple metal roof to protect the cab from falling debris from the many nearby trees and their avian residents. The tractor is facing out toward the drive, so the bitch CB can leave in a hurry.

There will be no leaving for them.

In her regular life, CB drives a high-end silver SUV. I was surprised it wasn't pink the first time I saw her in it. Angel has a black Ford Bronco convertible, vintage. When she and CB are on the road, these vehicles stay in the metal hut.

The property itself is almost two acres, according to the Chatham County assessor's website. It is bordered on three sides by more significant, more extravagant properties. Fencing divides them. They are not as secure as the fencing at the ranch but secure enough to dissuade me from attempting entry that way. Plus, I've seen cameras all around the property. I have another way.

For today, this is enough. The postcard I sent should arrive tomorrow, the day of the American Thanksgiving. I'm the only one who will be thankful that day. The rest will be praying unsuccessfully for their lives.



I'VE OFTEN THOUGHT about Jonny's death over the last months. Of course, I cared for him, in my way, but my truest, darkest anger is rooted in the idea that these two *putas* took what was mine. If I am honest, I was growing a bit tired of Jonny. He was changing, weakening. I sensed it. The Angel *puta* confirmed it.

Still, they must pay. No one takes what is mine without payment.

Their deaths cannot be anonymous. I want them to know by whose hand they die. It is vitally important they see me just before they go to hell.

There have been two extensive grocery trips. I believe they are expecting company for the holiday. That's fine. Just more fun for me. I will eliminate the bystanders first. Then I will kill CB. I want Angel to watch. I want to watch her helpless as her friends are slaughtered. I want her to suffer as CB pleads for mercy, as she screams in terrible pain.

This will be fun.



THE POSTAL CARRIER, a youngish woman with dark hair and a round body, takes her break in the same spot each day. She pulls her official vehicle into the park opposite the cottage. She finds a place along the shoulder, removes her USPS issued cap, and puts it on the small dash. She presses buds into her ears and retrieves her lunch from amongst the stacks of envelopes and boxes and packages piled around her. Predictably, today's feast is a turkey sandwich. From my hiding place, I see blood-red cran-

berry sauce mingled with creamy white mayonnaise oozing out from between two pieces of bread.

Since this will be her last meal, I allow her to enjoy it. I'm close enough to hear the podcast she's listening to – true crime, how ironic – leaking around the edges of her earbuds. If she doesn't already have hearing loss, she will soon.

She's wetting her finger and dipping it to catch the last crumbs of pecan pie when I step up beside her, reach in through the open sliding door, wrap an arm around her neck, and drag her out. Her brown eyes twitch like a rat's as she stares, mouth agape, too stunned to protest, much less resist. She thinks I'm here to rob her, I realize. She flaps her hands at the small truck in a 'take it' motion. Poor thing. It's not going to be that easy, I'm afraid.

I order her to strip. Her horrified expression makes me laugh. I'm not going to rape you, *Gorda*.

Once she has removed her USPS issued trousers and shirt, I tell her to lie face down on the ground. *Cerdita* doesn't like the feel of nature against her bare belly and thighs. Too bad. You're going to spend the rest of eternity getting friendly with each other.

Before she can emit another annoying whimper, I drop into a squat above her shoulders, cup my left hand under her chin and jerk her head back. My knife glides across her throat, once, swift and deep. If I can't take my time and do it right, there's no reason to prolong her suffering. She is merely a detail. The main event will be much, much better.

I pause a moment to enjoy the pool of blood growing under her. Red is my favorite color.

I use her bottled water to rinse the splashes of blood from my hands, but don't take too much time. No one will be close enough to notice. At least, no one that will live to talk about it.

It doesn't take long to change out of my jeans, T-shirt, and jacket into her uniform. I keep my boots on. There's a knife tucked into each, well-hidden by the baggy trousers. My only concern is keeping the trousers from falling around my ankles. I'm much smaller than *fat cerdita* here. I find a bungee cord in the back and use it as a belt. Not a style statement, for sure, but I cover it with a navy blue sweater I discover in the mess.

I put my hair up in a quick bun and tuck it into the blue cap with the official eagle emblem on the front.

Adios, cerdita. This park is rarely busy on the weekends, much less on a weekday. But, someone will find you, eventually.

Everything is going exactly as planned.



IF I COULD, I'D WAIT till tomorrow morning and catch everyone with sleep in their eyes. But *gordita's* supervisors will notice when she doesn't return, so I don't have that luxury. Today is the day.

There are more cars in the cottage's ample parking area than normal. The pink semi and the *putas'* vehicles are joined by a motorcycle and a blue mid-sized rental. I am confident the motorcycle belongs to the *pendejo* FBI agent. I have no idea who the rental belongs to, but I am not concerned. It looks like something a middle aged woman or an elderly man would rent. Both vehicles have been there since yesterday. No surprises.

It's just after noon. *Here we go!*

The mailbox for the cottage is at the front door, 100 meters from the street. Gordita would drive in each day, park in front of the metal hut, and hop out to deliver the mail so that is the routine I follow. Except, instead of heading directly to the house with a handful of mail, I slip past the semi. It doesn't take but a minute to drop the small, homemade bomb under the truck, near the twin gas tanks. The mail wagon shields me from view.

I pause to shove a random collection of ads, flyers, and envelopes into the ridiculous pink truck-shaped post box, return to my borrowed vehicle, and tootle away. *Nothing to see here, folks!* I don't bother cleaning the mail truck after I park. There will be no doubt who committed this crime, but they won't find me. I'm too smart. Once I've taken care of this bit of business, I'm heading south. Puerto Rico to start, then maybe Rio for *Carnivale*. I'll look great in one of those feathery headdresses!

After I'm changed back into my own clothes, I prepare. I clip on my camo fanny pack – certainly not sexy, but ever so functional! I've loaded it with a thick handful of zip ties, two scalpels, a fillet knife, and my favorite gut-hook knife. My tactical knives – a skeletonized combat knife and a slim vintage combat knife – remain tucked into my boots. I've looped a circle of duct tape through the fanny pack strap. It bounces irritatingly against my pelvic bone when I walk but I can handle it for a little while.

I wrap six heavy-duty elastic tie-down straps with clamp closures around my waist and hips like belts.

The only thing left is the detonator in the form of a throw-away cell phone, which I tuck into my jacket pocket. Why can't women's jeans have decent pockets?

I'm ready.

I can't wait.

I'm unstoppable.



THE EXPLOSION IS BEAUTIFUL. Strips of pink metal fly upward and outward, crashing into the metal hut roof, then falling back to the ground. The noise is tremendous, and jarring. There are two ways things can go now: All the residents will rush outside to see what happened. Or, one or two of the cottage's occupants will come to investigate while the others remain inside, leaving the front door open. Either way, I am ready.

Angel, CB, and that damned FBI agent burst out the front door. The mystery player remains inside.

Perfect.

No one notices me flattened to the side on the porch as they race toward the semi, and no one sees me slip into the house. I assess quickly: family room to the right, living room to the left. A stairway divides the center. A hallway runs parallel to the stairs, creating a perfect runway to the large kitchen. The décor is warm and friendly. I wonder if there's a "Live, Love, Laugh" sign somewhere.

Bah.

I move quietly toward the kitchen, which is nearly as large as the living room. Three stools sit in front of a peninsula projecting out from the right wall. Refrigerator and stove on the left wall, sink set into a row of cabinets opposite. The only other exit, the back door, is on the right wall as well. At the far end a cozy little breakfast nook features banquet seating and a large table. That table could come in handy.

A woman has her back to me. She leans on the peninsula, one hand holding a freaking pink landline telephone handset, the other tapping numbers into the old phone. Her hair, left natural is a beautiful halo of dark curls. She is taller than me by an inch or two, and she's in good shape, as evidenced by the tight navy leggings and cropped Chicago Bulls hoodie she wears. She is calm, cool, and collected as she tells the 911 operator there's been an explosion. She doesn't get a chance to give the address, although they'll be able to find it, and no doubt neighbors have called by now.

Before I can wrap my arm around her neck and choke her out, she drops to the ground. *Damn!* She must have seen me reflected in the glass cabinet door. As I readjust and move to jerk her up, she wraps the damn pink phone cord around my wrists. I growl in irritation and shake loose, but it gives her time to scabble around the peninsula into the kitchen center.

What is it with these *putas*? As she crawls away, I catch her ankles and grab hold. She's much smarter than I would have guessed – she rolls onto her back, using my grip on her feet against me to throw me off balance. I stumble. She kicks me in the jaw. I drop into a squat on top of her and begin to punch her surprisingly beautiful face, over and over. One of the blows lands just right, and she's out.

I had planned to make her death relatively quick and clean. No longer! I drag her to the refrigerator, zip tie her hands and ankles, then jerk her up, so her back is against the stainless steel. I tear a strip of duct tape and slap it over her mouth, then maneuver more tape through the two handles of the French door-style refrigerator, then around her forehead, around and around. I repeat the process, looping her neck and the handles together. She

will not be moving unless she's willing to spend her last minutes suffocating herself.

I hear a roar. The Angel *puta* is behind me, and she is furious! She circles around and tries to get to the knife block on the counter, but I kick her legs out from under her, and she lands face first on the ground with a loud, dull *smack!*

I lunge, determined to reach her before she recovers her wits, but she's fast. She knocks open a cabinet and reaches in. As I get close, her arm swings toward me, her hand clenching the handle of a large cast-iron skillet. The flat bottom connects with my shoulder and skids up and off the side of my head.

I see stars.

This isn't going as I'd intended.

The only thing that's gone right is that the CB *puta* and *pendejo* FBI agent are locked outside. I need to get this bitch under control. She must watch CB die. It cannot be any other way!

My head is swimming, and my vision is a bit blurry. I play dead, keeping my eyes mostly closed. That's the way it works in the best horror films, right? The dumb blonde thinks the monster is dead, until he grabs her ankle...

Angel may have blonde hair, but she is not stupid. She steers clear of me. Through my slit eyelids, I see her eyeing the back door. She's assessing her next move. The back door is a better bet than leaving me here unattended while she runs all the way to the front. Who knows what I might get up to?

She still has the skillet in one hand, and she pulls a butcher knife from the block at the stove, which moves her farther from me. I pray she does not pause to release the bound woman. She does not. She's not so bright after all!

Angel circles around, still wary, doing her best to stay out of my reach. It will be impossible to get to that back door without crossing my legs or getting near my head, and my arms. Which will she choose?

She decides to step over my legs. Bad, bad choice, *puta!*

As soon as she has one leg across me, I raise my foot up in a sharp kick to her center. She collapses with a groan, dropping her makeshift weapons as pain radiates out from her groin. She's closer to the door than I like, but she's incapacitated, at least for the moment.

Cubs girl is rocking the refrigerator as she tries to get free. Apparently, she's willing to risk herself to save her friend. What is wrong with these *idiotas?*

I push up, ignoring the shrieking pain in my head and shoulder, and step over Angel. She is in the fetal position, hands clutched between her legs as if that will help. I know from personal experience it will not.

"You made a bad mistake, *puta*," I say.

"Fuck *you!*" she responds and straightens both of her legs as a unit to kick my left ankle out from under me. I feel it crack as I tumble to the ground.

I am stronger than the pain! No more fun and games, puta! I push into a half-sit, half-sprawl, pull the skeletonized knife from my boot and reach across the tiled floor to plunge it into her.

Angel *puta* crab-crawls backward out of reach, smirking at me.

Smirking. At. Me! The bitch! The cunt! I will kill her!

That's when I hear the cock of a gun behind me. I turn my head to look up. The side door is wide open, and CB has her pink

revolver pointed at me. The FBI agent is next to her, and his gun is also drawn.

This is not the way it was supposed to go.

Chano would be ashamed. Papa would be saddened.

Well, fuck. Fuckity fuck. I'm too good for a goddamn American prison.

I hold the knife up as if in surrender, smile, and reverse it, all in one fluid motion. The tip pierces my belly just above the waist of my jeans, and I push it deep. At first, I don't feel anything except wetness on my hand. That clearness gives me strength to jerk the knife up. *Ah*. An electric tingle radiates outward from the entry point. *Now* I feel it. Heat, so much heat. And blood, so much blood. My heartbeat is pounding in my belly as blood pushes out of me.

I smile.

Death and I are long acquainted. I wonder if the Devil is ready.

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