



On the Run: A Sugarland Blue Novel

By Jo Davis

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Tonio knows that loneliness is the price he has to pay to avoid being hurt again. But the strictly by-the-book cop never expected to be blindsided by a woman who pulls him right out of his self-imposed isolation.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Sugarland Blue novels:

"With her descriptive storytelling and sharp banter, Davis's way with words will keep the reader hooked."—*RT Book Reviews*

"Scorching hot."—*Publishers Weekly*

"Romance suspense at its best...A wonderful series that has it all."—The Reading Cafe

"If you like romance, action, and mysteries, then you will love this book."—Once Upon a Twilight

"Jo writes stories that keep you hooked until the very last page and clamoring for the next book to release."—Book Monster Reviews

"A smart, sexy, and fast-paced read."—Fresh Fiction

"Amazing story and I loved every bit of it. Four and a half stars!" -- Night Owl Reviews Reviewer Top Pick

About the Author

Jo Davis is the author of the Sugarland Blue novels, including *In His Sights*, *Sworn to Protect* and *Hot Pursuit*, the popular Firefighters of Station Five series, including *Ride the Fire*, *Line of Fire*, and *Hidden Fire*, and the dark, sexy paranormal Alpha Pack series written as J.D. Tyler. She has also been a multiple finalist in the Colorado Romance Writers Award of Excellence, a finalist for the Bookseller's Best Award, has captured the HOLT Medallion Award of Merit, and has been a two-time nominee for the Australian Romance Readers Award in romantic suspense. She's had one book optioned for a major motion picture.

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PRAISE FOR THE SURGARLAND BLUE NOVELS

ALSO BY JO DAVIS

SIGNET ECLIPSE

Prologue

The stench reached his consciousness first.

Then the pain. All-over, racking agony that proved he wasn't dead yet, though he didn't have a clue how that could be.

Awareness of being trapped came next. Buried. But not in the dirt. As he tried to move, various items surrounding him shifted and rolled away. With his fingertips he felt . . . cans. Paper. Slime. Old food? Cold knowledge gripped him, turned his blood to ice.

After the bastards finished with me, they threw me in the garbage. Literally.

Move, Salvatore. Move or you're dead.

Using his hand, he sought the air. Pushed and clawed, twisting his body in the stinking refuse. The weight on top of him was heavy but not crushing. They'd meant to hide his body, completely confident he wouldn't wake, or make it out even if he did. He tried not to think they might be right.

At last, fresh air. But as he broke through the pile, the heap sloped downward sharply and he was tumbling sideways. For several feet he fell, jabbed and poked by sharp edges until he landed in the dirt at the bottom, the wind knocked out of him. Breathing was almost impossible, his lungs burning. He was hurt inside, and out.

His eyes opened to slits, and he tried to peer into the darkness. All he could make out was a sea of garbage. No moon or stars. Worse, little hope.

They'd thrown him into the dump miles outside the city, where nobody in their right mind would venture.

Don't give up.

Drawing his legs under him, he pushed upward. His legs were like rubber, his strength almost nonexistent. He made it halfway to a standing position before crashing back to the ground with a hoarse cry. God, the pain. His entire body felt hot and cold by turns, and swollen like a balloon. Any second, he would split and spill onto the ground like the plastic bags all around him vomiting their guts. His skin and clothing were wet, too, from head to toe.

He knew it wasn't all from the slime of the trash.

Shaking, Tonio crawled forward on his belly, inch by inch. Time lost meaning. An hour or three might have passed, though he didn't think it had been so long—he would already be dead.

Wetness ran down his forehead, down the bridge of his nose. Gradually he grew cold. So cold he knew he'd never get warm again. What was he doing? Too much blood loss. Confusion. He tried to remember, couldn't.

Knew that was the beginning of the end.

Anthony. I'm Anthony Salvatore, and I'm a cop. Have to get out of here, get help. Let them know—what?

Her name whispered through his mind like a promise. Or a nightmare. He didn't know which, and now he might never.

Angel.

Have to let Chris, somebody, know about Angel. Because if I fail . . .

Brother or not, Rab would kill her. He would show her no mercy, and she would end up here, in a grave next to Tonio. He couldn't let that happen.

"Angel."

Her name was on his lips, her beautiful face in his mind and the memory of her warm, supple body close to his heart when his strength finally deserted him.

He'd wanted years to learn her secrets, her joys, and had been granted only weeks. It would have to be enough.

"Be smart, baby," he rasped. "Stay safe."

Against his will, his eyes drifted shut.

And Tonio surrendered to the darkness.

1

Five weeks earlier

Detective Tonio Salvatore leaned against the bar in one of his favorite dives where the regulars only knew him by his first name, and sipped his whiskey, neat.

They didn't know what he did for a living, either, and nobody ever asked. He figured that, if anything, they had him pegged for a dangerous thug of some sort, maybe into drugs or fencing stolen goods like three-quarters of the guys there. Dressed as he always was when he came here, in leathers, a tight black Metallica T-shirt, heavy boots, a five o'clock shadow on his jaw and a bandanna around his short raven hair, it was a reasonable assumption.

It didn't hurt that he was six-four and muscular, and looked mean even though he wasn't unless he had to be.

Stroker's was a rough place with an even rougher clientele, but it suited him despite his job—or maybe because of it. It was the perfect place to keep his finger on the pulse of Cheatham County's criminal activity without risking being seen and recognized in his nearby city of Sugarland, Tennessee. He wasn't here in any official capacity, though. He just wanted to relax, incognito.

And maybe see some action that involved the weapon in the front of his leathers and not the one strapped to his ankle.

Taking another sip of his Dewar's, he savored the smooth flavor and recalled the sweet little piece of work from last weekend. The blonde, what was her name? Trish? Tess? Didn't matter. She'd been all over him from the minute she spied him at the bar, and it hadn't taken her long to maneuver her way between his legs as he sat on the stool, then proceed to check his tonsils with her tongue.

His cock stirred as he remembered giving her a ride on his Harley to the motel down the road, his go-to for the one-night stands that provided him and his chosen partners with relief. No way was he taking any of them home. He wasn't stupid.

The blonde had hugged him tightly from behind, pressed her breasts against his back, her hot crotch against

his ass, and he'd nearly wrecked trying to get them to the motel. Inside, they'd been naked in seconds and he'd been eating her out, enjoying the moaning and breathy little whimpers coming from her throat. She'd dug her fingers into his short hair and held on for the ride as he'd thrown her onto the bed, slid his cock deep, and fucked her so hard the headboard had cracked the plaster on the wall.

Looking around, he hoped she'd be back tonight.

"Another round?" the bartender asked. The guy's name was Rick, and he was as tough as anyone here. Had to be to work in a place like this. Tonio knew for a fact that the man kept a baseball bat behind the counter, and wouldn't hesitate to use it.

"Sure," he answered. Fuck it, he was off duty tonight. Always made sure he never drank when he was on call, either, and he wasn't tonight.

"Comin' up."

His night improved when the little blonde with the perky bust and tight jeans strolled through the front door. He turned back to his drink, making sure not to clue her in that he'd noticed her arrival. As he thought it might, pretty soon a warm body sidled close to him, and a woman's voice whispered in his ear, "Fancy meeting you here, Tonio." Small teeth nibbled at his ear lobe. "Buy a girl a drink?"

"You bet." Damn, what was her name?

"Hey, Tess," Rick said in greeting. "What's your poison tonight, baby girl?"

Settling on the stool beside Tonio, she brought a long, manicured nail to her lips in thought. Then she grinned. "How about a Screaming Orgasm?"

Rick snorted, then smirked at Tonio. "Don't think you need me for that one, but whatever the lady wants."

While Rick mixed her drink, she swiveled to face Tonio. Leaning over enticingly, she showed every bit of the rosy nipples on display under her plunging blouse and eyed him like a cat ready to pounce on a mouse. They both knew she wouldn't have to work real hard to catch him.

"Watcha been up to, sexy?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Not much. Messing with my bike, doing a little business to keep a roof over my head. The usual." All true, even if he'd just strengthened her perception of him as a criminal. Why he was playing this game, he wasn't sure.

But they were both enjoying it, so what was the harm? He might learn something interesting.

"What do you do to keep that roof over your head, hmm?" She grabbed the drink Rick slid over, and took a healthy swallow.

He'd stepped into this willingly. But there was no question he had to develop a cover now. Besides Tess, Rick and a couple of other men were very interested in his answer and trying to pretend they weren't. Who knew, he might luck onto a case that would lead somewhere, eventually to arrests for drugs or something else. Sure, his captain would have his balls for going out on his own, but if it led to something big, he'd forgive Tonio just as fast.

"I acquire things," he heard himself say. "For those who want them."

She arched an eyebrow. “What kinds of things?”

“Whatever you want, for a fee.”

“Anything?”

“Pretty much.”

Tess wasn’t fazed. “Good to know. I might be persuaded to pass that along.”

“Up to you.” Pulse kicking up a notch, he tossed back the rest of his drink, letting his demeanor say he didn’t give a shit whether she did or not. But he’d gotten a nibble that might lead to something bigger, and the game was on. The high was better than any drug.

Almost better than sex. But not quite.

After taking another drink, she slid a hand up the thigh of his leathers and brushed her fingers across his tightened crotch. “I can provide something *you* want, too.”

His dick was throbbing in his pants. Hot. “Yeah?”

“Oh yeah.” Leaning into his chest, she took his mouth and tangled her tongue with his. Her nipples grazed his chest and peaked to tiny eraser points, rubbing. Driving him crazy.

“Want to get out of here?” he asked between heated kisses.

“Sounds like a great idea,” a woman’s voice said. And it wasn’t Tess’s.

Tonio and his hookup turned toward the woman who’d stalked up to them without either of them noticing—and Tonio’s breath caught. The woman was several inches below Tonio’s height, perhaps five-nine, long-limbed, with a killer body that looked like she’d just stepped from the pages of a skin magazine. Long dark hair fell past her shoulders, almost all the way to her waist. Her eyes were large and green and her nose was a sharp blade above a lush mouth made for sucking cock. Full, ripe breasts pushed at the snug cotton shirt that had been cut with scissors or a knife to make the low V-neck, and made sleeveless as well. She wore tight jeans and black ankle boots with silver conchos studded around them. Encircling her right upper arm was a surprisingly feminine Celtic tattoo. His mouth watered. The look that would have come across as tacky on anyone else was stunning on her.

Definitely centerfold material.

“What the fuck do you want, Angel?” Tess was clearly less than pleased with the other woman’s presence.

“Are you really that stupid?” Angel stared at her, then shook her head. “You know this is Rab’s territory. He’s not going to be happy to find you here again, and he’s not taking you back.”

What? Stuck in the middle of Tess trying to make another man jealous? *Fuck.*

“You think I give a shit what that asshole brother of yours thinks or what makes him happy? Maybe it’s *you* who doesn’t want me here,” Tess said smugly. “He hasn’t said a thing to me.”

“I happen to know that’s because he hasn’t seen you.” Angel sighed. “Look, I’m telling you this for your own good. He—crap, too late. Here he comes now.”

Angel really did look worried, Tonio had to admit. When Tess glanced toward the door, she did, too. Who was this Rab guy who had the women so nervous? Tonio followed their gazes and cursed inwardly.

The man who held their attention was a frigging tank, maybe even an inch or so taller than Tonio himself. He was about thirty, bald, and wore his tats proudly as sleeves down both thick arms. Several pendants bounced against his broad chest, and he wore jeans that emphasized his muscular thighs. There wasn't an ounce of fat on his frame.

Rab headed straight for their group, a steely expression on his face. Tonio slid from his stool and planted himself slightly in front of the women on pure instinct; this wasn't even his fight, for God's sake, and he wanted no part of their argument.

"Bitch," the man growled, throwing his sister the barest glance before focusing on Tess. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Tonio's back went up. He absolutely *hated* any man who addressed a woman as *bitch*. Only bottom feeders resorted to that kind of talk to make themselves seem like bigger men.

"What do you think?" she purred slyly. Curling into Tonio's side, she wrapped an arm around his waist. "I'm here for a drink, same as you. A little company, too. No harm in that."

"There is when you know goddamn well I don't want to see your face." His eyes were dark and cold, like black marbles. He hadn't acknowledged Tonio at all.

"Fine," she said airily. "I guess I won't introduce you to my friend Tonio here, who has a special talent."

That icy gaze settled on Tonio for the first time, and inwardly he actually shuddered. That didn't happen often. There weren't many people who scared him, but there was something about this man he perceived as dangerous. Even deadly. Maybe it was because he was too still, too calm. As though watching and calculating.

"What talent might that be?" Rab drawled, checking him out from head to toe, his disdain clear.

"Acquisitions," Tess said pointedly.

And here we go.

That caught the other man's interest. "What's your specialty?"

"Don't have one. Someone wants something, I get it." That was taking a risk, not specializing. It might sound too close to fishing on Tonio's part. Too suspect.

Rab studied him for a long moment. Tonio held his gaze, not backing down. *Never, ever volunteer more than you're asked. That's the first rule of being undercover.* Eventually the other man spoke again.

"You got a last name?"

"Reyes," he lied.

"You got a number?"

Shit. He couldn't give out his real cell phone number—he'd have to get a burner, fast. And have an

unpleasant conversation with Rainey first thing tomorrow. He was onto something here, he could feel it. The room had hushed, every single person there tense. Belatedly, Tonio noted the men, all dressed in similar fashion, who'd risen to their feet and moved subtly behind Rab. None of them appeared to be the stereotypical bumbling backwoods yokels. They looked tough, and serious. He'd bet most of them had done hard time.

This man was no small-time player.

"I'm around," was his only reply.

Several men flexed their fists. Looked to Rab, who held them off with a slight flick of a hand. *Jesus*. He'd escaped getting the mother-fuck beat out of him by the skin of his teeth, and all he'd wanted was a cold drink and a hot woman. In that order.

"I expect you will be," Rab said, his warning unmistakable. "Same time tomorrow night. Here. We'll talk."

Dismissing Tonio, the man strode away, taking up residence at a table in a corner of the bar. The only vacant table in the place, which must be reserved for him. Angel stepped closer to Tonio and tilted her head toward the corner.

"You've got his attention," she said, sounding less than pleased. And still concerned. "I hope you know what the hell you let in when you opened that door."

"Interesting way to talk about your own brother."

A second of unease flickered in her jade eyes. She glanced around, and apparently decided Rab's men were no longer listening. "My advice? Don't come back. Ignore it at your own risk, and my conscience is clear."

"Noted." Angel, warning him off. He was even more intrigued than before—and he knew he'd be back.

Angel turned her attention to Tess. "And you? Don't let the door hit ya where the good Lord split ya."

"Fuck off, Angel."

Angel glanced between them, a smile curving her lips. Without another word, she turned and walked away, joining a couple of women at a different table. Girlfriends of two of Rab's men, maybe. She didn't look Tonio's way again.

"Come on," Tess urged, voice irritated. "Let's go."

Taking her hand, Tonio led her outside to his motorcycle. His mind kept going back to the mysterious woman, Angel. Sister of the man he might be working undercover against, in order to expose any number of crimes. Certainly off-limits.

And yet—

No. There was no use going there.

Against his back, the little blonde was warm and willing. His libido resurfaced with a vengeance and his cock woke once more. By the time he parked outside the motel, he was so damn hard he could hardly walk. He needed relief, and Tess was pretty. Great in bed, too.

After obtaining his key, he dragged her inside and stripped off her top. Her breasts weren't that full, but they were creamy, the tight peaks pink and lickable. She was a bit skinny, but that hardly mattered as he watched her slip off her jeans and get naked.

He stripped off his shirt and she attacked his belt with fervor, unzipping it to expose his aching erection. His shaft throbbed, almost deep purple with want. Then she sucked him into her mouth and began to work him over, and he went up in flames.

"*Dios, yes,*" he hissed. "Like that. Suck me."

She did, as enthusiastic about it as she was last week. He watched his dick slide between her lips, wet and shiny, and couldn't help imagining a different woman doing him. One with long dark hair and plump lips. Groaning, he picked up the pace.

When he was near the edge, he gently disengaged, chuckling at his lover's whimper of displeasure. Quickly he removed his boots, finished stripping his pants, retrieved a condom from his wallet, and gloved up.

"How do you want it, honey?" he asked, moving in close. He took her mouth in a heated kiss.

"Eat me, then fuck the shit out of me," she demanded breathlessly.

"Not a problem." He winked, liking her giggle. Tess was rough around the edges, and knew some dangerous people. She was dangerous to *him* because of the company she kept. But she was cute, and in some ways, maybe more naive than one might guess.

"Kneel by the bed and lean over the mattress," he ordered.

She hurried to do as he said, and spread her legs wide. Crouching behind her on the carpet, he bent and spread her with his fingers. Then he gave her slit a slow lick, laughing when she squirmed, pushing back, wanting more.

He wasn't a selfish lover. It was important to him that a woman enjoy herself to the fullest, and he set about making sure Tess was satisfied as well as himself. He lapped at her, tasting her essence and loving every second.

"Delicious," he murmured.

She gasped. "Shit. Tonio . . ."

"Need my cock, honey?"

"Yes!"

"Say it. Tell me what you want." He loved to hear the words.

"Fuck me," she breathed. "Please."

Needing no further encouragement, he lined up with her entrance and pushed inside. Her sheath was so hot and tight around him, he almost came like a sixteen-year-old on the first stroke. Holding deep, he calmed the fires a bit, and then began to pump.

"*Dios, bonita,*" he muttered. "Such a sweet pussy."

Her reply was incoherent, just the way he liked. He fucked her slow and deep, at first. Gradually he picked up speed and soon he was shafting her hard. Her trills of pleasure echoed throughout the small room, driving him over the edge. His orgasm exploded and he emptied his release into the condom, filling it.

She came down with him, channel spasming pleasantly around his cock. He fucked her a few more times to wring out every last bit of ecstasy for them both, then pulled out gently. After helping her up and onto the bed, he went to the bathroom and tossed the condom, then cleaned up. Then he took her a warm cloth, waiting as she used it, and tossed it into the bathroom.

He reached for his shirt, fully intending to leave.

“Can’t we have another round?”

He studied her, lying on the bed, naked. Inviting. Straight blond hair fell attractively around her face, and she pouted.

“Sure, what the hell?”

Abandoning his shirt, he climbed into bed and under the covers. And he wondered if this was the first of a very long list of mistakes he was going to make in the imminent future.

A short time later, he woke in the night with his hard cock rubbing the curve of her ass. With a groan, he reached between them, fingering her slit from behind.

After that, there wasn’t much thinking involved at all.

* * *

“You fucking did *what?*”

The shouted question froze every single person in the main station outside the conference room more effectively than a blast from a Taser. Captain Austin Rainey looked about two seconds from blowing a blood vessel in his brain as he slammed the door, cutting off the curious stares from the main squad room.

“I’ve got a hunch, Cap,” Tonio insisted in his own defense. “This Rab character, he’s looking to take on somebody with acquisition skills. And trust me, these guys aren’t buying antiques or fine art. If they’re into anything legal, I’ll eat my badge.”

“You might do that anyway when I shove it down your throat,” Austin snapped.

Tonio’s partner on the force, Chris Ford, shot him a look that said *I told you so*. Tonio ignored him. “Cap, I’m telling you, this group is dirty. They’re—”

“I *know*.”

Tonio hesitated. “What do you mean, you know?”

“Just what I said, shithhead.” Austin swiped a hand down his face and glared at him. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“Uh-oh,” Chris murmured.

Dread seized Tonio's gut. "No. But I'm sure you'll enlighten me."

"You've just stepped on an ongoing investigation into Robert 'Rab' Silva and his merry band of thieves, drug runners, and killers," Austin said pointedly. "By the City of Langdon PD."

Tonio processed that, heart sinking. He'd seriously fucked up. "They're outside Langdon's city limits! How was I supposed to know?"

"Oh, let me see? Maybe *ask* first? They're outside *our* city limits, too, but it just so happens they've been wanting to take these guys down for a while. You just landed in the shit, and now I've got to fix it."

"I'm sorry, Austin," he said quietly, meaning it. "I just felt I'd stumbled onto something and my instinct kicked in."

"Which creates the question—what the fuck are *you* doing hanging out in that dump, anyway?"

Tonio shrugged. His reasoning seemed so stupid now. "I like going somewhere nobody knows me, fitting in with the crowd. Maybe even learning tidbits we can use. I've done that before, when I was with the San Antonio PD. Sometimes it pans out."

"Okay, let me think." Austin was silent for a moment. "This might work to our advantage. Maybe Langdon could use a man on the inside, something they haven't been able to make happen. Could be they'll turn over the case altogether."

Austin left the room without dismissing them, so they waited. In the meantime, Chris gave him shit.

"Smooth move, Ex-Lax," he said, snickering.

"Man, shut up. I'm not in the mood."

"You, like, *never* fuck up. But when you do, you really go for it."

"Chris," he started, getting pissed.

"Hey," his friend said, holding up a hand. "I've got your back, no matter what. You know that."

His partner was so sincere Tonio's anger evaporated. "Thanks."

About twenty minutes later, Austin walked back into the room and shut the door. "The chief at Langdon is seriously fucking pissed. But they let us take it, since they haven't been able to get an in with the group."

"Yeah?" Tonio said, brightening.

"Yep. Time will tell how lucky a break it was." He studied Tonio thoughtfully. "Tell me exactly how this meeting came about. Leave nothing out."

So he spared no detail. He wasn't embarrassed about hooking up with a woman. Hell, he was human. And it wasn't like he'd intended to fuck the gang leader's ex—it just happened that way.

"He doesn't think much of women, either," Tonio mused. "Going by the way he talks to them."

"Speaking of women, you still seeing this woman, Tess?"

Tonio shrugged. “Hadn’t planned on it, especially. Why?” One look at the captain’s face, and Chris’s, and he knew where this was going. “Oh, no way. Fuck that, I’m not getting involved long-term with someone.”

“You said yourself she’s the way in,” Chris pointed out. “She knows the group, and more important, Rab.”

“Yeah, and he could kill me for touching her, even though they’ve broken up.”

“Did he seem like it was a problem?” Austin asked.

“Well, no,” Tonio admitted. “But—”

Austin snorted. “But nothing. You started this, and now you’ve got to keep your cover. Dumping her too soon will set off alarm bells we don’t want clanging, you got that?”

“Yes, sir.” *Shit and fuck!*

“Good. Besides, you can have your cake and eat it, too, in this case. Just don’t blow this.”

Resignation settled over him. With acceptance of the situation, excitement about bringing down a big player began to fire his blood. “Should I start tonight?”

“Might as well, if you’re ready.”

“I am, Cap.”

“Good. Chris, you’ll have his back. Monitor behind the scenes, keep your partner safe.”

“I will, Cap.”

“Okay. Get going and report in once a day to me and Chris, nobody else.”

Austin left, and Tonio blew out a breath.

And just like that, he was undercover working for one of the most dangerous men in the entire state, with an unwanted girlfriend in his bed.

Tonio went to sleep that night, and dreamed of a woman with a Celtic tattoo and jade green eyes.

2

Angel paused in her work, leaned the handle of the mop against the bar, and wiped the sweat from her eyes.

God, how she wished she could afford a regular cleaning service. But that sort of luxury would have to wait, like everything else on her wish lists of *one day* and *maybe*. Glancing around, she tamped down a surge of irritation that Andy, her head bartender, had booked out last night after closing, leaving her to take care of it. She released a sigh, knowing she couldn’t blame him.

Rab and his posse had hung around long after she locked the doors last night, something that was becoming an unwanted habit. Andy was terrified of the gang, but Rab most of all. And he should be.

Eight months ago, her brother had been paroled. She hadn’t known he was out until forty-eight hours later,

when he'd shown up on her doorstep begging for a place to crash.

"Just until I get on my feet, sis. I'm a changed man, I swear."

For all the mistakes he'd made, he was family. The only family she had left, except their mother, whom she didn't talk to much. Less than two weeks after she allowed him to cross her threshold, his buddies had arrived—the ones that weren't still locked up. That had been the beginning of the end of her hard-won freedom from their parents' legacy. She saw the past repeating itself now, in her brother.

Rab hadn't been lying. He *was* a changed man—changed for the worse.

All their lives, he'd been a first-class fuckup. An apple right off Dad's felonious tree, and their mother had been too afraid to stand up to either of them. Rab's slide into delinquency had started when they were kids, with petty shit like pinching candy from the grocery store. He was the kind of kid who liked hurting small animals, too. Just for laughs.

By the time they were in high school, he'd graduated to stealing cars for the hell of it. Then on to selling them. That proved to be so profitable he and his buddies branched out into other goods Angel didn't want to know about.

But the cops got wind, and eventually busted them. Rab went to prison, as hardened and cynical as a man three times his age. If she'd held out a shred of hope that his time inside had resulted in a productive, law-abiding citizen, that prayer had been smashed to bits the instant Rab and his dogs made themselves a fixture in her bar and in her life. They harassed and terrified her employees, drove out the good customers, and attracted birds of a feather. Like that new guy, Tonio.

Their presence was becoming a big problem, because the stakes for her brother getting caught this time were much higher—Angel could lose her business. Her freedom. Worst-case scenario, her life.

She had to get rid of them. But how? Rab kept her in the dark about the dirty details of his dealings. The couple of times she'd tried to press him for answers, he'd told her in that cool, dangerous voice to mind her own fucking business and she'd be a lot happier. So she had nothing solid to tell the cops, even if she dared.

And getting help from the outside? She had no idea whom she could trust. Even cops could be dirty. Not that she knew of any on Rab's payroll, but still.

The scuff of heavy boots on the concrete floor jerked her to the present, and she looked toward the door to see the object of her fears and frustrations bearing down on her. Straightening, she raised her chin and looked Rab dead in the eye. *Never give him an inch. Never cower.*

"You're up early," she said, her tone direct. Unwavering. More often than not, it was the best way to handle him. "Did the world explode? Is the sky falling?"

He blinked at her, then barked a laugh, the sound rusty. He wasn't a man who made that noise often. "You think you're funny, dontcha? Get me a beer."

With that, he sat his ass on a barstool and gazed at her expectantly.

She snorted. "Get it yourself. Anyway, what about your drug testing? Fail that, and you're going back inside."

Is it terrible of me to think that wouldn't be the worst thing to happen?

“Not gonna happen,” he drawled, sliding off the stool. Walking around behind the bar, he grabbed a glass and drew a beer from the tap. “I’ve told you before, it’s all about timing. I’ll be clean when the next test rolls around.”

“If your timing was so impeccable, you wouldn’t have been caught and put in prison in the first place.”

He stilled and set the glass on the polished counter, eyes narrowing. For a couple of seconds, she thought she’d gone too far, but then his lips turned up.

“My sister’s got solid brass balls. I’ve always admired that.”

“Thanks. I think.” Rolling her eyes, she headed for the back to put away the mop and bucket.

“Hey, it’s a compliment,” he called after her.

After putting away the cleaning items, she leaned against the wall with a sigh. Rab was in an unusually good mood, but it wouldn’t last. Never did. The man was a ticking bomb, waiting silently for his moment to detonate.

Resigning herself to his presence, she walked back into the main area and busied herself behind the bar. Aware of him studying her, she did her best to ignore him until she couldn’t stand the quiet any longer.

“What *does* bring you by before noon?” she asked, checking the liquor stock.

“Got a meeting with the new recruit. Tonio.”

“Now?”

“Soon.”

She frowned. “I thought that wasn’t until tonight.”

“I moved it up.” He took a sip of his beer.

“How’d you get hold of him?”

“He called, left his number with Andy. Anyways, it’s good to keep the men off guard. Plus, I want to feel him out when there’s not a crowd distracting me.”

“If you decide to take him on, what’ll you have him doing?” She pretended not to be overly interested in his answer, but he still didn’t bite.

“Not your concern,” he said sharply. “You writing a book or something? You’re always asking questions about my business.”

She glared at him. “That’s because you’re conducting *your* illegal business in *my* place of business, and you could get me shut down. Not to mention all of us thrown in the joint. Then where would we be?”

“Relax. Nobody’s going to blame you, especially if you don’t know a thing. So stop asking and you’ll be better off. I’d hate to have to make you.” He winked.

Is he serious? Would he actually harm me? Forcing herself to remain calm, she tidied the glasses. “So, what

about Tess? She's fucking the new guy, you know."

"So? I don't give a shit what that dumb bitch is doing, or who." But his words had taken on a dangerous edge, belying the truth of them. There was something in his eyes, a nasty gleam she didn't like. "She stays away from me, we'll be fine."

"And you don't care that your new man is with her?"

"She's not a problem, for now. She becomes one, I'll deal with her. And I'll make sure Tonio understands this, too."

How will you do that? Rab had never killed anyone—that she knew of. Angel forced herself not to shiver.

The door opened, and more footsteps sounded at the entrance. Angel swung her gaze toward the newcomer—and her breath caught in her throat, same as it had last night.

Tonio was a big man. All over. Well over six feet of pure muscle, a lot of which was emphasized by his snug black T-shirt. One with white letters spelling SLIPKNOT across his chest, and straining with the job.

His torso was flat, and she could see the hint of a six-pack. Long legs were encased in worn jeans with a hole ripped out of one knee, and he wore black shit kickers on his large feet. God, what she could see of his body was a dream, and she wondered what he looked like naked.

The very best of his features, however, were his sexy face and short black hair. Neat eyebrows arched over brown eyes so dark they almost blended in with his pupils. His nose was straight, not too big. His mouth was full and wide, his jaw strong and attractively peppered with stubble. He wore no bandanna today, leaving his hair free to feather back from his face.

He was the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. And he was taken.

As he approached, his gaze flicked to Angel. Before he returned his attention to Rab, she could've sworn his eyes had warmed with male appreciation. If so, he quickly and wisely masked it.

"Rab," he said, holding out his hand. Her brother hesitated before he shook it, and then Tonio gestured to Angel. "I don't think we got a proper introduction last night."

Rab nodded and spoke in a clipped tone. "This is my sister, Angel. Angel, Tonio Reyes."

"Nice to meet you," she said. Belatedly, it occurred to her just how ironic those words were, coming from her mouth. When had it ever been *nice* to meet any of Rab's thugs? Hadn't she just despaired over how to get rid of them?

"You, too." Again, there was a flash of heat in his gaze.

She hadn't imagined it, then. Before she could come up with anything more to say, her brother steered the man away, into his usual booth in the corner. As she worked, she kept one ear open, but could only hear the faint murmur of their voices. An occasional word reached her, but no specifics.

Since there was no way of getting closer without pissing Rab off, she eventually gave up and took refuge in her small office in the back. Perhaps she could lose herself in making the accounts balance.

Anything to forget about salivating over the gorgeous man with the big dark fuck-me eyes.

* * *

Tonio was painfully aware of Angel moving around the bar and dining room. Every step she took, that tight round butt swaying in her jeans. A certain part of him took notice, and he hoped the table concealed his interest.

She wore her long dark hair loose again, and the strands brushed over the Celtic tattoo on her arm. To an unpracticed eye, she appeared busy. But he'd gained enough experience over the years in watching people, observing body language, to know that she was tense. And aware of his gaze tracking her every move. She wasn't unaffected.

With an effort, he forced his attention to Rab, who was eyeing him, expression stony. "So, tell me, what can I do for you?"

Rab paused. "First, keep your eyes off my sister."

"She's a beautiful woman," Tonio replied with a shrug. "I'm not blind."

"The last man who messed with her walks with a cane and is adjusting to life without his spleen." A cold, glittering gaze let Tonio know he wasn't joking.

"I'm with Tess, remember?"

"That slut's not the kind a guy stays with forever. Especially with a woman like Angel around to tempt him."

Tonio bristled a bit. True, the two women were completely different, but that didn't make Tess a bad person. "Did I come here to discuss business or are you going to waste my time?"

After a moment, Rab sat back in his chair and regarded him thoughtfully. "You said you acquire things but don't specialize. Give me some examples."

"I fill special orders. Cars, weapons, you name it. I get the merchandise from wherever it's located and deliver it to the buyer. Sometimes the stuff is boxed or crated and I don't know what's inside, but that's rare. I get paid either way, so I don't give a shit."

"You don't know what you're taking? How does that work?"

"Occasionally I'm a middleman. Somebody wants merchandise taken from one place, such as a warehouse, and delivered somewhere else. I just grab the goods. I don't care what it is."

"But most of the time you're the acquisitions guy?"

"Yeah. I prefer it that way, knowing what I'm after and what the risk is."

"So you specialize in cars. Weapons. What else?"

"I've run some weed. Coke. Even a few stolen paintings once." Settling into his role, he gave a laugh. "Don't care for art myself, but whatever. Money's green no matter what the load."

Rab nodded. "Anything you won't do?"

Tonio weighed his next words carefully. "Two things. First, I won't take on human cargo. No trafficking

illegals. That's some sick shit, man. I mean, stuff is just *stuff*, like the art. But people? Forget it."

The other man took a draw of his beer. Set it down. "I don't deal in selling people. Too messy, and I like my green to flow from less complicated sources. Besides, I like to play with my toys so much I sometimes break them. It's how I decompress."

Tonio paused. "Whaddya mean? Break them, how?"

"Never mind that for now. What's the second thing?"

Cristo, what else was this crazy bastard into? Tonio let it go for the time being—but he would definitely keep in mind what the man had said. "I'm not a hit man. You got that kind of issue, I'm not the guy you call. I'm in acquisitions and delivery." Another calculated risk, but Rab didn't seem bothered.

"But I'm willing to bet you're armed, even now."

"I'm carrying," he confirmed. No reason to lie about that. "I'd be stupid not to protect myself if necessary, but I don't go around offing people for thrills."

One corner of Rab's mouth kicked up. "Me, neither. Hard as it might be to believe, I don't start that kind of trouble. But I don't mind finishing it, if I'm forced to."

"Good to know."

"I'm a businessman, like you. My goal is making money, the fastest, easiest ways possible. And socking it all away for a rainy day, like when the government finally falls completely fucking apart and takes the banks down with it."

Sadly, Tonio couldn't totally disagree with that viewpoint. Just Rab's methods.

"Hell to the fuckin' yeah," he said. Apparently that response pleased his new *boss*.

Rab drained the rest of his beer, then said, "You get ten percent of the haul."

"When I take most of the risk?" He snorted. "Twenty."

"You're dreamin', man. No way. We all take risks."

"I didn't set up this meeting, you did," Tonio pointed out, tapping the table with one finger. "You're looking for someone to take the heat off. An acquisitions man who knows what he's doing, and that's me. I think you've got something in mind or I wouldn't be here right now."

Rab stared at him for a long moment. "Fifteen. I have a big job in mind, but I want to assign you a few trial runs first. See how things go."

"Sure. What do you have in mind?"

"What types of vehicles do you have access to for hauling?"

"Anything the job requires. Van, eighteen-wheeler, plane . . ." *Or I will, as soon as the department loans them to me. One more expense for Austin to get cleared, and won't he be happy? Shit.*

“Good. We’re gonna need a semi next Thursday night. I’ll give you the deets once I have them firmed up.”

“No problem.” Just then his phone buzzed—the one he’d acquired for the undercover job. *Tess*.

U busy 2nite?

He had reservations about giving her the number, because it meant a personal tie he didn’t want. On the other hand, she’d given him an “in” and made his presence in the group seem legit.

“Something important?” the other man asked casually. There was the hint of an edge in his tone, though.

“Just Tess.” Pocketing the phone, he looked up. “Her hanging around, that going to be a problem? Your sister seemed to think so, last night.”

Rab considered this for a few seconds. “Hadn’t been for you, I would’ve tossed her ass out. She can hang as long as she’s with you. But keep the bitch out of my face. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Asshole. He longed to punch the bastard in the mouth. How he kept the desire out of his expression was a mystery.

Rab stood, signaling an end to their discussion. After giving Tonio a knuckle bump, he headed for the door. What Tonio really wanted to do was give him a knuckle bump in the face.

“Gotta hit the men’s room. See you,” Tonio called. The other man gave a wave but didn’t look back.

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