

*Pretty  
Brown*

GENARO

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- UNEDITED EDITION -

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*Raw. Real. Unedited.  
Just as the author intended.*

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## *Prologue*

The door swung open and Alex jumped out of Esteban's car while it was still moving. His heart pounded. His feet hit the pavement in full speed, zipping through the police and ambulance's red and blue flashing lights surrounding Sandra's home.

"Shit!" someone yelled. "Grab him!"

Two police officers broke loose behind Alex, catching him by both arms and stopping him from coming any closer to the crime scene.

"What the fuck happened?" he yelled. "Where is she? Sandra, Sandra!" He called

to his lady, anxious and eagerly hoping that she would call back with any noise, a cry, a scream, anything to let him know that she was okay.

“Take him to the car,” one cop said to the other.

Both dragged Alex, forcefully kicking the air towards a patrol car and leaned him against the door. One cop stood in front of him making sure he didn't move an inch.

The suspense was killing him. The wait was torture and the time seemed to drag like a food stamp line.

All Alex could do was anxiously await and see the outcome of the horror that had just happened to Sandra, the lady he'd grown to love and that changed his life forever. He glued his eyes to the front door knob as it begun to creak open.....

# ~1~

## *Three Months Earlier*

“You got my back *ése?*” Freddy demanded to know. Both he and his best *homito* Alex; drove up into the vacant parking lot of the abandoned grocery store.

Alex smirked. For the past ten years he always had Freddy’s back and still, he had the nerve to bring up the question every time they were getting ready to conduct business.

Alex didn’t respond. He knew that his boy Freddy knew better. He began to doubt when Freddy looked in the back seat at his other homeboy Chuy and asked to ready the shotgun and nine mill *cuete*.

“Hold off Chuy!” Alex said, as he turned toward Freddy in the driver seat of his Candy Green Regal.

“Why you strapping up the fire power? All we gonna do is collect the *feria*, right?”

“What the fuck Freddy? You didn’t tell him? That ain’t right *ése!*” Chuy uttered from the back seat.

Alex shook his head and a look of disappointment grew on his face.

“You fucked up again, didn’t you?” he asked Freddy.

“I didn’t fuck up! The *puto* skipped out on me with the payment. He fucked up!”

Alex grew quiet. Freddy had been in the dope game for a few years and from time to time he needed to call on his boys Alex and Chuy to help collect payment when someone skipped out.

It was no big deal in the past, up until a few months ago, when Freddy decided to move up from hustling Mary-Jane, to Snow Flake cocaine. That was a big step, one that both Alex and Chuy didn’t want to climb. The money was good, ten times better than weed but the game was ten times worse.

It belonged to Silvio Mendez, the snow king of Southeast Texas. The one cat that nobody dared to fuck with. He had earned his spot in taking over the snow game when he first started some eight years ago. He came hard with mad weight and cracking skulls left and right on the little baggie handlers who only held street corners. Silvio took the whole block and eventually, the whole area.

He grew so strong and so fast at the right time, when there was no other actual boss in that area. He made the right move and came in before anyone else snatched his golden idea. And he made sure, no one would take it from him.

Alex wanted no part of the snow game. He knew that to sell snow, you had to get permission from Silvio and sell only his product where he granted permission. That's how he controlled it. Silvio would allow people to sell his product. After all, it made him money and all the change would add up. But he controlled it all with his own rules and if

anyone disagreed, then Silvio would make them disappear.

Still the money was higher than weed. It paid better and even though Silvio made more money off his rich crooked lawyers and doctors or any other business customers, he would allow knuckle head hustlers like Freddy to sell in the barrios and ghettos with a good profit. The only problem was, not many clients in those neighborhoods had money. The cash flow was slow and they always begged for a front. Freddy would slip now and then and allow them one out of pity. For some strange reason he would trust them to pay. Alex could never figure it out.

“I keep telling you not to front the product.” Alex said to Freddy. “You better hope I can get this money back for you before Silvio finds out.”

Freddy didn't respond. He put the car in park underneath the full moon in the parking lot and Chuy put his head down. The vibe alone put a bad taste in Alex's mouth.

"We're not here to collect, are we?"

"No man, we're not. Silvio got a hold of me and wanted me to meet him here."

"About what?"

"I don't know. All I know is that Silvio rarely comes to this side of town, especially to meet up with someone. He just called me out of the blue. I think a snitch told him about the front I did last week."

Freddy pulled out a small baggie of snow. He dipped his car key in and shot a snort up his nose, snoring as he inhaled the flakes. He offered a hit, passing it around the car but was rejected by both Alex and Chuy. He dipped for another hit and Alex shook his head.

"Go easy with that shit bro. It's gonna fuck you up."

"I can't let Silvio see me nervous."

"Don't sweat it, *ése*."

Headlights suddenly turned into the empty lot approaching Freddy's Regal. Slowly, they switched off, leaving only the orange parking lights of the luxury Chevy Avalanche. The door swung open

and a silhouette of a man began approaching Freddy's ride.

A silent vibe made them tremble. Chuy gripped the shotgun in the back seat while Freddy grabbed the steering wheel. Alex hid the nine-mil between the seat and passenger door.

*This shit's crazy!*

Freddy rolled down his window as the casual dressed man approached.

"What's up, *ése?*" Freddy greeted nervously.

The guy looked inside the car with a stare more serious than a heart attack.

"Step outside Freddy. Silvio wants a word with you."

"All right," Freddy responded, opening the door and looking back at his two boys.

He gave them a "watch my back" nod.

Alex and Chuy stood back watching, holding their ears open and hoping to catch what Freddy and Silvio were discussing.

All they could see was Freddy holding his head down, facing the dirty

slab. He was swaying back in forth with his hands stuffed in his khaki pockets. It was obvious Silvio had him thinking hard about something.

A few minutes passed. Freddy turned to walk away and back towards the Regal as Silvio and his crew began to pull the truck out of the parking lot. Alex and Chuy felt relieved. The pressure was lifted but the anxiety of wanting to know what Silvio wanted Freddy for was still in the air.

“What happened?” Chuy asked anxiously.

“No sweat, *vato!* He just wanted to know if I could handle a few extra eight-balls. Some other hustler couldn’t handle the weight.”

Alex was relieved. Nothing happened to Freddy. Good thing too. If Silvio would have known that Freddy was in debt with his snow, by fronting people a free hand, then he may have not come walking back to the car. Alex didn’t like that feeling, something had to be done.

*I'll bail him out one more time. Can't let my homie go down!*

"You know what we have to do, right?" Alex asked Freddy.

"Yeah, I know foo!" Freddy snapped back.

The thought of him screwing up was irritating. Felt like he was being controlled and held back. He wanted more, the greed and power to control was addicting and he hated working for someone.

"We'll collect the money, *ése*. Don't sweat it but I'm going to look into higher opportunities for this game."

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Alex was quiet as Freddy drove down the city highway towards *El Gordito's Mexican Grill*.

"What is it, man?" Freddy asked. "You acting all silent like you pissed at me or some shit. What's on your mind, bro?"

Alex shook his head.

“Just keep driving *ése*. I’m concentrating.”

“Well, don’t go off and daydream *vato*, cause we almost there.”

Alex bounced his thoughts around his mind back and forth. Freddy always had “money making opportunities” to live large and roll big, but it was the same shit. Only talk, with no progress. Freddy would hook up with Silvio and sell snow to addicts. That was it, nothing more. He didn’t even bother to save his money.

*I’m tired of this shit. I need to bail and do something with mi vida! I can’t hang around in this game no longer. Got to get my own business and go legit. Freddy’s going nowhere!*

Freddy caught Alex’s attention away from his inner thoughts, when his headlights came on and a better glimpse of the nightfall was seen. The stars were shining and the moon was in full.

Alex loved those nights. Somehow, they eased worries and offered a relaxing

atmosphere to situations like they were fixing to step into.

Freddy needed to collect. He offered Alex a piece of the action as he was in need of grabbing either the snow or the green before Silvio found out.

"I gave this cat three days, *ése*. Three fucking days to pay up and *nada!* Not even a call to give me an excuse. Can you fucking believe that?" Freddy asked, in a frustrating growl, trying to sound as if he was a hardcore dealer.

"I fronted the *puto* two eight balls. He's been avoiding me since. Who the hell does this punk think he's dealing with?"

Alex lit a cigarette. He kept his mouth shut and avoided pumping Freddy up with pride.

*Whatever, ése. If you was really a bad-ass then I wouldn't be here.*

The sky was completely dark. Freddy pulled his '86 Regal into the back parking lot of the restaurant, grabbing a view of the back door.

“He has to come out soon and throw the trash away or something, bro. We’ll wait here for that *puto*.”

The car was in park and the engine stayed running. Both grew quiet and Freddy reached beneath his seat like some big shot, grabbing and handing Alex a nine-millimeter *cuete*.

“It’s loaded, *ése*, ready to blast a motherfucker!”

Alex smiled, taking the chrome into his hand.

*Yeah sure. You bad-ass vato loco.* He thought. *What the hell is wrong with him? Homie starting to act different.*

Freddy reached in his pocket, pulled out a small zip bag of snow and dipped his key for a small snort.

“You still fucking with that shit man!” Alex said, frustrated. “Shit’s gonna fuck up your brains, *ése!*”

Freddy laughed sarcastically.

“Don’t give me no preaching service man, you ain’t no angel either.”

“Yeah but I don’t fuck with it every-day!”

"Bullshit! I saw you snort umm ..."  
Freddy stuttered as he raced his memory looking for a date.

"It was six months ago, wise man!"

"Fuck you!" Freddy answered, taking in another snort. "Don't worry about me. Worry about yourself. Start thinking of ways to run your side of the business."

Alex smirked off a laugh. He could relate to Freddy's response clearly. That was exactly what he wanted. His dream was to have his own business, away from the hustle game. He wanted to go legit and not worry about any laws fucking with him.

He had begun looking into a trade school and catching a degree at the Technical College so he could open up his own business. He had his high school GED and figured he might as well use it. Alex regretted dropping out of school and wanted to make up for it.

Only thing that stopped him was Freddy's dependency on Alex watching his back. It would bother him and eat at him to leave his boy hanging in trouble.

But the more time passed, the more Freddy was making it easier for him with the bullshit situations he kept getting into.

Ten minutes of waiting and four cigarettes later, the two noticed a couple of busboys dragging out bags of trash towards the dumpster.

“Look,” Freddy said. “There he is.”

He pointed at one. Alex turned his head and was surprised at a young teen walking out. In fact, both guys were young, working as busboys in an after school job.

Yeah, they looked like little *cholos* with their baggy pants and baseball caps, but the look on them was still of young wannabes. Alex was expecting older dishwashers or a cocaine head manager.

“Shit,” he responded, upset. “He can’t be more than seventeen man. Why do you have to keep fronting’ to these kids? You can’t make shit off of them. What they gonna say? Wait ‘till my paycheck, *vato*. I get paid on Friday and my mom

will go cash it! Fucking Silvio is gonna kill you for screwing up his business.”

Freddy frowned at Alex’s sarcasm.

“You let me worry about Silvio. He’s my problem. Just go and collect my money, eh? That’s our agreement.”

Alex looked into Freddy’s eyes.

*He’s right. Let him deal with the snow. All I get paid for is collecting. Fuck it, not my problem.*

He took his smoke and plucked it hard out the window, placing the gun in the backside of his khakis.

“All right, *ése*. Roll up next to him.”

Freddy screeched his tires in drive as the car jerked and pulled right next to the busboys at the dumpster. Alex jumped out the car like a hit man, swinging his fist and decking one of the little *cholos* across the jaw. He dropped him on the pavement.

He wrapped his hand in a choke-hold, gripping the other teen’s neck.

“Lay down. Or I’ll knock the shit out of you too!” he ordered, pushing the

young *ése* towards the floor. He made him lie face down on the ground.

Alex could hear crying sniffles starting in sinuses.

*Fucking Freddy, screwing with these chavalos. Shit's embarrassing!*

Alex turned his attention back to the other *lil' cholo* bleeding from his lip.

"Look at me!" Alex said.

He looked up.

"You're past your due date, motherfucker! Give up Freddy's money or get in the car!"

The busboy had a look of fear in his face. Alex almost felt sorry for the kid but couldn't show sympathy.

*The lil' vato shouldn't have screwed with Devil's snow in the first place. He knew that consequences could occur.*

Alex put his hand on his back, reaching for his gun.

"Wait *ése!*" the kid yelled, scared of getting capped.

"I have it. I was going to pay Freddy tonight, here!"

He went into his pocket and pulled out a folded over wad of cash. He handed it over. Alex tossed it to Freddy inside the car and he began to count the green.

"All there?" he asked Freddy.

"Yeah *ése!* Let the little bitch go!"

Alex opened the door and climbed inside the car, shaking his head upset at the situation.

Suddenly, the busboy sprung off the ground like he was just shot with a dose of adrenalin.

"*Putos!*" he yelled, pulling out a twenty five-millimeter toy gun that sent a popping shot inside the car.

Alex went down as the bullet flew in, catching Freddy's forearm.

*This little fucker's got some nuts!*

He opened and swung the door hard, hitting and catching the busboy off balance before jumping out the car.

The little *cholo* went to aim his piece but Alex came in, pushing and tripping him into the pavement. He jumped in the air and came down with a huge stomp on

the little *cholo's* head, knocking him out cold.

Alex pulled out his chrome nine-mil and aimed it to the other cat lying out on the ground.

"No!" he yelled as a piss puddle grew underneath his legs.

"I only work with him. I don't have no money, but I get paid on Friday!"

*Que la chingada!*

Alex shook his head and hurried into the driver's seat.

"Fuck!" Freddy yelled. "Blast that bitch! Fucking kill him!"

Alex yanked the car's gear into drive, screeching away from the restaurant and heading towards Saint Mary's Hospital.

~2~

"You should have wasted that little punk!" Freddy yelled, looking over his small-bandaged wound.

Alex didn't respond as he leaned on the recovery room's wall, taking in Freddy's gripe.

*This motherfucker here, wants me to kill a kid?*

Freddy had received four stitches from the bullet's graze.

"I'm going to kill that little punk," he said, curling his lip and grinding his teeth.

Alex walked towards the door. He leaned his head out the hospital room slowly, trying to be unnoticed.

"You had the fucking gun!" Freddy yelled. "You should have blown him away!"

Alex grew tired of his bitching. He walked up towards Freddy and clinched his hand around the wound.

"Ahh!" Freddy screamed.

"You still have your life, *ése!* Be thankful. I held my part but I wasn't going to play death for you. If you've got beef with him, then you deal with it!"

Freddy twitched his arm, breaking loose of Alex's painful grip.

He stayed quiet but the look on his face was one that Alex recognized right off the bat. He knew Freddy was pissed. He always wanted to leave a memorable mark behind, one that let him pick his head up higher and brag up and down the streets.

Alex had been in situations before from collecting Freddy's money, but no one had ever grown nuts big enough to shoot after being taken down. Only a young thug who didn't know any better would make that kind of move. Those were the worst ones. They had too much pride and ignored common sense. Freddy was very lucky the kid had bad aim.

Alex peeked out the door again. He made sure no one was around.

"Okay," he said.

"You got to bail before the cops come questioning especially if you still got that snow in your pocket."

Freddy caught the drift.

The cops always went to hospitals and questioned any bullet or stab wound. He knew they were going to show up soon.

Not only that, but someone probably reported the gunshot or fight back at the restaurant where everything went down. Alex had suspected the young thug that pissed his pants ran inside, crying and screaming.

Freddy jumped up and made his way to the door.

*"Let's roll, ése."*

Alex hung back as Freddy headed out to the hallway and stopped, waiting for him to catch up.

*"Go ahead. I'll get with you later. I don't want them to see the both of us bailing together."*

*"Orale, I'll scoop you up in front."*

Freddy rushed down the hall, leaving Alex behind.

After a few minutes of hanging back and giving Freddy enough get-away time, he began to walk out of the room. Soon as he reached for the door, it was swung open by a young Chicana in her twenties wearing a nurse's uniform.

Alex was stunned.

*Damn, she looks good ... oh shit, I know this chick!*

He recognized her from high school. Her name was Sandra Garcia and Alex was frozen by her view like a cat in a tree.

She had been his high school crush. She was the one he liked but never grew the courage to ask her out just before he dropped out as a junior. She always paid attention to her books and every time Alex would talk to her, he would blush and crumble. He always wondered what happened to her and now standing in front of him, he was starting to feel his ears grow red all over again.

The two stared at each other back and forth as if they were caught in a web.

"Oh, no. Where you shot?" she asked.

Her voice was still soft and sweet and Alex was in a quick second loss at its memorable sound.

"Huh, oh me? No, I wasn't shot. That was my boy. He got into a scrap with some little punk that pulled out a *cuete*, but it's no big deal."

Memories flew through his head and he could feel that old crush starting to brew again. Sandra smiled and waved her hand at his stare.

“Hello, are you okay?”

Alex shook it off.

“Yeah, I’m cool, it’s just that, you know, it’s been ...”

“Long time no-see,” she finished.

“Yeah, damn girl you still pretty. I mean, you prettier now. No, I don’t mean that you was ugly. I mean ...”

She laughed at his stuttering.

“I know what you mean, and thank you. You haven’t changed either. You still have that cute smile.”

*Oh shit!*

His heart began to race and he could feel his hands growing sweaty.

*Make conversation, ése! Now’s your chance!*

“You here to clean the room or something?”

Sandra laughed at Alex’s question.

“No, I’m a nurse,” she said. “Right after high school I went to college.”

“Cool, I graduated too!”

“Oh yeah, you went to college? What did you major in?”

“Huh, no. I mean I graduated GED school! I mean I passed the test.”

Alex paused. He looked down and was trying to control himself. He wanted so bad to make conversation but everything was coming out wrong. The whole scene was tripping him out. His feelings were coming back to haunt him. He really liked her and now, knew for sure that nothing had changed.

“Well, I got to bail before the cops come. My homie is waiting outside.”

Alex lifted his pants and swayed back and forth like he was getting ready to run a relay.

Sandra looked out the door.

“You better hurry. I saw them a few halls back. They may be coming here.”

He shuffled his way to the door and came to a sudden stop at Sandra grabbing hold of his hand.

“You’re still shy and sweet.” she said.  
“Why don’t you call me later?”

Alex nearly fell but managed to keep his cool as the goose bumps crawled up his spine. He smiled as Sandra gave him her number, feeling as if he had just struck gold.

“Maybe we can go out?”

“I promise I’ll call you. I really want to talk to you some more.” Alex responded.

The two paused and gazed into each other’s eyes. They were definitely feeling each other.

“I thought you were leaving?” Sandra asked in a flirting whisper.

Alex smiled. “I’ll see you later.” He said, making his way down the hallway.

He reached outside, stood at the hospital entrance and waited anxiously for Freddy to drive up and pick him up.

*Where the hell is he?*

Alex lit a cigarette and looked out for Freddy to pull up close.

“Damn, come on *vato!*”

The corner of his eye suddenly caught sight of a patrol car creeping in close to the entrance of where he was standing.

“Shit!” Alex muttered.

He took his cigarette and stepped on it, shooting the smoke out his lungs.

*"Where the fuck is this vato?"*

The car came to a stop. Two officers, dressed in their blue uniform stepped out, looking at one another in silent chats and began to walk towards him.

His heart pumped fast.

*That punk who pissed his pants must have called the cops. Either that or someone heard the gun shot. Damn, I'm going to jail!*

The news was on the scanners and the cops were out looking for a suspect, especially, a male Chicano *vato*.

*I got to think fast.*

He reached in his pocket, pulled out his cell phone and placed it to his ear, pretending it had just rung.

*"Yeah, mija? Where you at? I'm out here waiting for you."* He said out loud as if he was looking for his girl.

The cops were getting closer. Alex's mind was racing as he could hear the law's shoes clicking off the ground and approaching him.

He turned around, looked inside the hospital's window and was caught by Sandra. She stood close to the entrance, talking to a nurse at the information counter.

"Oh, I see you!" He said out loud, hurrying inside and avoiding the cops reaching him. He hung up his cell phone and pulled out a small stack of folded dollar bills from his pocket.

"Hey, *mija!*" He called out, wrapping his arms around and hugging Sandra.

She was surprised and before she could say anything, Alex whispered in her ear. "Cops are behind me, just play along, please."

Sandra peeked over his shoulder. She saw the two officers slow down, throwing looks of confusion at one another. Their acts alone showed they already had Alex as a guilty suspect.

"Here you go." Alex said, handing her the little wad of cash he held in his hand. "I'll pick you up later. Call me when you ready."

Sandra smiled, leaned in and hugged him gently before dropping a thought into Alex's ear.

"I get off at eleven. If you make it, meet me here, we can go out. Okay?" she whispered.

Alex smiled. He loved the idea and couldn't wait.

*Hell yeah!* He thought, passing up the confused cops with a cheesy smile.

"Oh yeah, she's my Pretty Brown Lady, officers," he bragged.

Freddy pulled up to the entrance. Alex opened the door and stepped inside.

"Man, I was watching you foo!" Freddy cheered. "You're the slickest motherfucker I know!"

Alex lit another cigarette. He had to chill his nerves from bouncing off the walls.

"Let's go man, before the cops creep behind us. They may be dumb, but still, they like fucking with people."

The two drove away. Alex rolled down the window, gazed at the stars and

enjoyed the feel good smile Sandra painted on him.

“Take me to the house, *ése*. I have to shower and be ready by eleven.”

~3~

Alex walked up to the sidewalk of the hospital’s parking lot. He looked up at the stars and admired the beautiful night sky. Those nights didn’t come often and sometimes when they did, a rain cloud would kill the mood. Alex took advantage of the beautiful sight, admiring it.

He checked his gold-plated watch, eleven-o-two it read.

*She must be heading towards her car any minute.*

He began to straighten out his hair and clothes before she appeared.

He got ready, showered, shaved and slapped on his favorite casual gear, a dark brown polo style shirt and matching blue jeans that hovered over a pair of brown leather shoes.

He touched his neck with Romance cologne and popped in a piece of chewing gum to help control his smoking urge. He stood nervously, waiting for Sandra in good appearance.

He wore a simple look, like he was going out to a movie, away from the tough *cholo* style that was an everyday play. He felt good about Sandra and wanted to show her that there's more to him than just a tough attitude. He was happy, very happy that Sandra took notice of him, something he didn't want to screw up.

*She my lady, the one that got away, not this time!*

Alex checked his watch again. It felt like the time was dragging, eleven-o-four.

"Damn, is she coming?" He whispered.

Suddenly, he turned around. He could hear laughter as he walked down the sidewalk, catching his attention.

It was Sandra, walking with a black female security guard. The two were talking back and forth, laughing at work and gossiping. Alex felt his heart pound against his chest harder than a club DJ thumping bass jams.

His hands soaked in sweat.

*Chill out, ése. Don't let her see you nervous. Just relax and play it cool.*

Sandra came to a quick-stop when she saw Alex. Her eyes crawled up and down scoping out his appearance. She was impressed and the smile that grew on her face put Alex a little more at ease. The start of their relationship had just sparked into play.

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The following few nights Alex and Sandra went out. He didn't feel right at first. He felt lost, out of place with her even though he really liked her. He did

what he could to match as a couple. But the more he thought about it, the fact that he didn't have a career like she did was eating at him. He felt underhanded.

Alex sat at the hood of her car one night as she cuddled on his chest. Sandra could tell that something was wrong with him.

"What is it?" she asked. "You're not yourself tonight."

Alex hesitated a little bit. "Just got shit on my mind, you know?"

"About what?"

He looked up at the sky. He was nervous about what he was about to say to her but he had too. He wanted to be honest.

"About us, you know? I can't understand why you're going out with me. I mean, I want to stay with you. I really do. But, you got a good job and you have different views of things than what I have. You know, you don't have a lot of drama on your hands."

Sandra smiled, "What are you worried about? That I'm judging you?"

“No, it’s just that, you know. I told you before, I got my mind set to have my own business. But I feel that you don’t believe me. Like I’m just some average Chicano who does nothing but fuck around, causing drama.”

Sandra hugged Alex to put a warm feeling back in his soul. She knew he was worried. She felt that he was trying to prove something to keep her, but she knew deep inside that he didn’t have to prove anything at all.

“Baby, if that was true, I wouldn’t be here with you. I really like being with you and I know that you are trying. You just need to take it step-by-step. I’ve gone out with guys who live in suburbs and have fancy cars, but that’s all they’re about, money. I don’t want that. I want someone like you. Someone nice, caring, knows what he wants out of life and is determined to earn it. That’s what I really like about you. I know inside that you won’t give up, no matter what. I know you won’t.”

Alex hugged back on Sandra with pure emotion. He could feel a strong connection with her. She sent nothing but pure positive vibes into his soul.

*No way I'm giving up now. It's time for me to get my shit together and cut away on my own!*

~4~

Two weeks had passed. Alex and Sandra had been spending more time with each other. Alex had slowly begun to pull away from both Freddy and Chuy. But Freddy had become more distracted and was mapping out his own plan of an empire takeover on Silvio. Finally, Freddy felt he was ready and the day came for him to find Alex and introduce his plan.

Alex sat on the stairs of the porch as Freddy walked up to him.

“What-up, *ése!* Long time no-see ... ha, ha, ha! How are things going with you and that *hyna?*”

Alex narrowed his eyes and grinded his teeth. He didn't like the term Freddy used to describe Sandra, *hyna*. It didn't match her. Sandra was a lady, not a street drama chick.

“Hey, *ése*. Do me a favor and don't call her a *hyna*.”

Freddy paused as he sat next to Alex while pulling a smoke out his pack. He broke out in a quick "whatever" laugh.

“Okay, I see, she means that much to you, eh? It's cool, *ése*. I can respect that. I heard she was a nurse, that's good. Just don't get your head up in the clouds and look down on everyone else and shit. Always remember where you came from, *vato!*”

He lit his cigarette and Alex pulled it out his lips before Freddy could even finish inhaling his first drag. Alex smiled at Freddy, took one big drag off the smoke and handed it back to him.

"I know where I came from, bro. Do you know where you're going?"

Freddy peaked around to make sure no one was paying attention to their conversation as if the two were in a crowded restaurant. He leaned in a little closer to Alex, like he was fixing to give the layout of a major war plan.

"Look, *ése*. I got something that's going to grow big. This move is going to be the one to pick us up in both money and power."

Alex didn't answer. He paused to hear Freddy.

*What genius idea could this money hungry idiot have now?*

"Look, bro," Freddy continued, "I got a connection with a supplier that's got some mad taste over Silvio's snow. It'll wipe him out and give us control over both his customers and turf. I got an idea that by the time Silvio catches wind of anything, he would have lost too much power for an attack. It's a full proof down-low take over, *ése*, guaranteed!"

Alex shook his head in disappointment.

“I can’t help you bro, too risky and Silvio is one who puts his whole life into his investment. I don’t think it’s a good idea. Personally, I think you really need to reconsider your plan.”

Freddy patted Alex on the back, trying to give him reassurance.

“Don’t worry *ése*, I’m telling you, I got shit right this time. The game is set. All we have to do is carry out the move. It’ll be full-proof. Don’t worry. When the cash starts rolling in, both you and me will be living like kings. I’m talking money with POWER! You can even take good care of that *hyna*, I mean ... lady you’re going out with. You need to have a pocket fatter than hers anyways.”

Now, Alex really hated the idea. He respected Sandra to the fullest and this motherfucker wanted to put her life at risk through him? Shit, Alex knew better. Silvio was one man not to start a war with. The *vato* would touch anyone just to get revenge, including loved ones like

family members of Alex or even, Sandra if the drama ever got that far.

Alex kept his cool. He knew better than to argue with Freddy. It wouldn't take much for Freddy to lose his temper and give off a bad quote that could trigger anybody, including his best-homie.

"Look, bro. I really can't help you out on this one and because you and me are so tight, I have to ask you to please reconsider. I think you're going to make a move that will bite you in the ass. Don't do it. In fact, get the fuck away from Silvio and catch a new wave, *ése*."

"Shit, what do you mean, new wave? There's money to be made here, we can pile up so high that the mountain alone will carry us away from this shitty city! Either way it goes, *ése*, I'm doing this whether you're in or out."

Alex stood up getting ready for Freddy's reaction. For the first time ever, Alex was going to deny Freddy and not stand by his side. He wasn't sure how pissed off Freddy would get but, the idea

of the answer “no” alone, couldn’t have a nice return.

“Well, *ése* ... I’m going to have to let you ride alone on this one.”

Freddy plucked his cherry lit smoke at Alex in disbelief. He stood up pissed. His fist was clinched shut, giving off signs that he was about to lose control.

“How in the fuck you gonna dis’ me? You and me are boys, best crime-partners! This is supposed to be our ride to take over the shit we’ve been working for!”

Alex grew angry. He had a point and wanted to make it clear. He yelled back his defense.

“You went for this, *ése*, not me! I told you that I don’t want shit to do with the snow game! All I do is hold your back and collect when these punk-kids that you fuck with, screw you over! You’re climbing a ladder that is way over your height, *ése*. You’re going to slam down hard when you make the wrong step!”

Freddy walked towards his car passing Alex.

“You know what, *carnal*? When I got my pockets fat and living large, you’re going to wish you never made that choice. You’ll be coming to me and I’m going to put you at the bottom, below my cleaning lady, picking up my pit-bull’s shit! You fucked up *ése*, straight betrayal, leaving me hanging. I’ll get another partner, one who’s worth my green!”

A blue colored Honda Accord pulled up to the curb as Alex waved Freddy off, walking towards the street.

*Whatever, ése!*

Freddy could see Sandra sitting in the driver's side.

“Oh, I see what’s up witcha! You listening to that *hyna* throw shit in your mind, eh? She didn’t want shit with you in the past and now she’s taking hold of your nuts? Man, you growing dizzy, fucking confused and whipped!”

Alex erupted in anger.

*Motherfucker got some nerve!*

He shut the door and marched towards Freddy. Freddy slammed his door shut and began to pose in a fighting

stance, waiting for Alex to come close and start swinging. Tension grew in the air. Sandra ran in front of Alex.

"Baby, no! Please, don't. You're better than this. Just walk away."

Alex stopped. The two gave each other mad-dog looks of pure rage. Sandra pulled Alex by the arm, leading him to her car.

"We'll talk later!" Freddy yelled.

"Yeah, whatever, homeboy!" Alex replied. "Later."

Freddy stepped inside his Regal and revved up the engine.

*He won't listen, going to learn the hard way. Shit, another funeral case! Alex thought, as Sandra pulled the car away. Fucking Freddy's losing it!*

---

"What the fuck do you want me to do, Sandra? Just sit back and let my boy die in his own mess?!"

Alex responded angrily, as he lied in the bed at Sandra's home. Tears grew in

Sandra's eyes and she sat up, covering her face, thinking twice about suggesting Alex not to get involved with Freddy's mess.

Alex began to feel bad.

*I shouldn't react so pissed. Damn, chill, ése, chill.*

But he had to try and make Sandra understand that he was going to worry about Freddy, especially after being boys for so long.

He hugged on Sandra as she sniffed softly. "Baby, my pretty brown lady, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell. But *mija*, you got to realize that I don't want anything to happen to my boy. I don't need to go through another *homie's* funeral."

Sandra wiped her tears. She pulled the bed sheet to cover her naked body and shook her head.

"I don't understand exactly what it is. I love being with you and I've grown more and more attached to you. Maybe it's that I don't want anything bad to happen to you. I see a lot of victims in the hospital. I don't ever want to see you in

there with a gun-shot, you know? When are you going to start and do something with your life, like you've said?"

Alex took a deep breath. He knew what Sandra meant. But he couldn't argue with her. It was true. He was falling back again into another one of Freddy's messes. Alex needed to move on. He had to get his shit together.

"Baby," she said. "What about school? What about getting your degree and starting your own business?"

Alex grew quiet, thinking of her question. The thought alone hit him deep, knowing he was coming so close to trying.

"I didn't anger you, did I?" she asked.

"No, No!" Alex responded. "It's just that ... with all this shit that's going on I have thought about it. It's hard to make the move. I already know what I want to study but I want to clear this shit with Freddy first."

"What do you want to study?"

Alex hesitated for a second. He hoped that she wouldn't think like others had before.

He hoped she wouldn't think like the ones who said Alex wasn't smart enough for school. He hoped she wouldn't be like the ones who discouraged him and convinced him to "Fuck school." Mainly it was Freddy, always saying that school was a waste of time that could be used to run the dope game slicker than baby oil.

He took a small breath.

"I wanted to study commercial air conditioning. I don't know why but I've always been interested in it. I could grow some experience and start my own business with big companies around here. Make some good *feria, eh?*"

"You should go for it," Sandra encouraged.

"You really think so?"

"Yeah, you'd be good at it. You got what it takes if you really want it. You just need to pull away from the drama."

Alex smiled. He held Sandra tight in his arms. Her supporting words put pure

warmth into his soul. He liked the way he felt. It was as if he could jump up and conquer anything. Her care made Alex think that he had something worth fighting for after all.

Sandra pulled away and looked Alex straight in his eyes with a look of pure love.

“Babe, I have to tell you this and please don’t get upset. But if you don’t pull away from the drugs and all that drama, then I don’t know how much longer I can spend with you. I’m growing very close to you but, I cannot allow myself to be brought down in misery.”

Alex stepped out of bed, made his way to the bathroom and flipped on the lights. He leaned over the sink and looked up at the reflection in the mirror, staring into his eyes.

*I can't lose her. I love her. From now on, Freddy's on his own!*

Three months had passed. Alex had moved in with Sandra and soaked in her supporting love. For the first time ever, he was heading in the right direction.

Sandra had convinced him to give technical school a try and he did. He enrolled just in time, using a student loan for Commercial Air Conditioning.

He felt good, proud at what he was doing. He knew he had it in him, always had. He had that little voice inside that kept pushing him to go further. And now, it was finally sketching out to play.

He had fallen in love with Sandra. She was the greatest thing that ever happened to him and he planned on making their relationship last. She gave him support

and encouragement. She believed in him and most of all, loved him.

He promised not to go back into Freddy's dope game. He promised to work and for the first time ever, he was happy to pull minimum wage at her uncle's restaurant.

He loved his *Pretty Brown*. The nickname he gave Sandra to match her skin tone. He always said she was his Pretty Brown Lady. His mind had been set and he refused to risk losing her at anything. He didn't want to fall backwards, but the thought and worry of Freddy stayed on his mind like a tattoo's rejection.

---

It was a Saturday afternoon and Sandra was off at work. Alex stayed home studying his books for almost three hours. He could feel his head throbbing over all the words and numbers he needed for an upcoming test. The time

had come for a breather, so he stepped outside into the warm breeze.

A luxury car crept up. Black BMW, shined in chrome trim and glossed away with wax and dark-tinted windows.

*Who the hell is this?*

The car parked in the driveway and its door opened wide, letting Freddy step out of the driver's side in flare.

Alex hadn't seen or talked to him since the two decided to go separate ways. He asked about Freddy from time to time and heard that he was still alive. That's all he cared to know, all he could risk to know. Besides, if anything did happen to Freddy, for sure his *homie* Chuy would find him and hand over the news.

He had a good thing going. With Freddy out of the picture, with his drug schemes and negative attitude, his path was at a better chance to keep straight.

Alex sat on the porch, watching his best-homie walk up.

"You haven't been around much since you moved here," Freddy said.

“Got a good thing going,” Alex responded.

Freddy leaned in to give Alex a quick hug as if nothing ever happened between the two.

“I got a good thing too man!”

Freddy flaunted, pointing to his new luxury car with a bragging smile.

Alex didn’t pay too much attention and gave him a smirk.

“What bro? You not impressed?”

“Nah man. I think I liked the low-low better, showed different money. Now I know you’re making a wrong move.”

“A wrong move? What the hell you talking about?”

Alex stood up.

“This ride could only mean one thing. You’re expanding. And if you are, you’re going to be looking for me now more than ever. I can’t have that weight on my shoulder.”

Freddy glanced at his car, admiring its style.

The picture it played had money written all over it. It was a true attention-

grabber; one that Freddy didn't need if he couldn't keep his drug scheme on the down-low. The car was sure to grow hawk-eyes all over him, including Silvio's.

"Yeah, I'm blowin' up. I thought you might like a piece of this action. The weight is growing heavier and I could use a good man on my side."

"No," Alex responded quickly. "Besides, I thought I was only going to be good for scooping up your pit-bull's shit. Remember? Not my cup of tea, *bro*."

Freddy was quiet for a moment. He ignored the comment Alex had just reminded him of. He put his hand into his back pocket and pulled out an envelope.

"Here's five thousand cash man, just to think about it."

Alex pushed the envelope away and started to walk inside the house.

"No thanks, *ése*."

Freddy grew angry. "You growing soft!" Freddy yelled. "I'm going to be the

one calling the shots soon. You're going to have to come back to me!"

Alex turned back around.

*Who does this puto think he's talking too?*

Now he was growing angry. Freddy stood at the edge of the porch. Alex had enough of his shit. Even after avoiding him for three months, Freddy still hadn't changed. He always thought he could either insult or test Alex's pride into getting what he wanted.

"I'm growing soft?" Alex responded pissed off. "No, brother. You're growing stupid. You're making dangerous choices and flashing money through materialistic shit. I know Silvio and there's no way in hell he's going to let you take over his turf. You work for him, fool! You're tied like a fly in his web, even with whatever plan you're using to come up in the game.

"There's something that you're not telling me. And you think you're going to come down here and pull me into a pile of shit that *you* started with five grand? You're fucking mistaken. Open your

eyes, *ése!* No way in hell Silvio is going to let you take over his business. No way! That *puto* will find a way to put you six feet under!"

"I told you!" Freddy yelled. "You let me worry about Silvio. You stick with me, *homie*. I've paid you good money in the past and there's no reason for you to stop. You work for me, remember?"

"I work for myself! You and me ain't partners no more. Go on your own! Forget about me! I'm heading on a new direction now! You think I sat on my ass for the past three months not doing shit? I'm on a different path *vato*, one that won't lead me into my own death!"

Freddy grew mad at Alex. His rage was brewing his blood hot. He knew that Alex wanted to go on a different road. He had caught the hints Alex was tossing around in the past. But never thought he would actually stick it through.

He didn't take him seriously. He was sure that Alex would watch his back again with the five thousand dollars he was offering.

Alex had made up his mind and was dead serious. Freddy was at a time that he needed him at his side. The shit had grown too thick for him. It was true what Alex warned him about, the dope game is a deadly game. And it was a game that was dropping a heavy-stress hand on top of Freddy's head.

"I was right. You are growing soft. Not only that, you're growing whipped! Mad-whipped! That woman is grabbing your nuts and nailing them on her wall. You better make her turn loose of them, *ése* or that bitch is going to have you killed!"

WHAM!

Alex swung his fist at Freddy and struck him dead square in the mouth! Freddy dropped to the ground bouncing off the sidewalk. His vision blurred for a quick second. Then, he shuffled his hand in the back of his shirt. He reached for a gun, ready to blast Alex and send him to his grave. Suddenly, he froze. He was caught surprised and looking Alex dead

in his eyes through the barrel of a chrome nine-mil aiming at his face.

“Get up, *puto!*” Alex said as both were mad-dogging each other. The anger tension and vibes floating on the airwaves were bringing back friendship memories. Never did the two ever think that one would be ready to blast the other in heat.

They had arguments before, bad arguments like the last one but nothing that escalated into *cuetes*. This was it, no more avoiding games, all the cards were on the table. Once a homie pulls out a gun on another, it could only mean one thing.

No matter how bad or how peacefully the sore fight would end, the thought and memory of pulling out a gun will always remain. It won't ever be the same again. No trust, nothing. Their friendship had just officially ended.

Freddy stood up, facing Alex, quiet and serious as the deadly bullet was ready to pop him.

“Hand me your piece, *ése*.” Alex commanded.

Freddy pulled out his nine-mil, turned it barrel-side down and handed it over.

Screeching tires rushed a white Cadillac to the curb, causing Alex to turn his head. The back window came rolling down and a shotgun’s barrel sprung out, aiming and turning Alex into a target.

Freddy grew a crew, had to, and Alex was somewhat impressed that Freddy held an ace in his pocket for people to watch over his back. However, he was disappointed the card was being played on him.

*A damn shame, Alex thought, vato came over here not even able to trust me. Fucking dope game got him living in fear and tremble.*

“You got a crew now.” Alex said. “No, wait. You need to have a crew. I guess it helps you sleep at night.” Freddy didn’t respond. He kept mad-dogging Alex in his frustrating freeze.

“So what now, eh?” Alex asked. “Here I am in a situation. I either take you out and have your boys kill me, or let you

slide away from here. I don't want to kill you man. It's not my nature, but it can be. Tell your boys to drive away."

Freddy paused for a second. Alex took one step closer and the two could hear the shotgun cock a round into the chamber. Freddy raised his hands up to the Cadillac.

"Pull away, *vatos!*" He ordered. "Don't worry about this situation. It's only a misunderstanding."

Freddy's gunman lowered his shotgun back inside the car.

"*Vamonos!*" He said as the car began to creep away.

Alex lowered his gun and stood in front of Freddy, waiting for him to leave Sandra's home.

"How do I know you're going to let me walk? You never let anyone walk away. How do I know you won't try to catch me slipping?" Freddy asked.

"You're slipping as we speak." Alex responded, tucking away his gun into the backside of his pants. "You know me, *ése*. I'm not just letting you walk. I'm making

you an offer. My life in exchange for yours, you go free, I go free and this shit ends right here, nothing else. This way, I'll know you won't come at me and I won't come at you. It ends right here, *entiendes?*"

Freddy wiped the blood from his mouth. He was a revengeful addict, never liked having the lower hand, but after Alex handed him the ugly view of his pride's reality. Freddy was willing to listen and accept his offer at least, for the time being.

"I can live with that. But if you ever try to come at me ...."

"I won't!" Alex interrupted. "Now, walk away."

Freddy walked back towards his luxury car. He opened the door and still, allowed his anger to speak. He wanted the last word. It gave him a sense of pride.

"I hope everything goes good with you and Sandra. Take care of her, *ése*. Women don't last forever."

Alex remained quiet. He knew Freddy meant more with his last comment, but Alex just wanted him to leave his sight. Besides, Freddy always wanted the last word. It wasn't anything new to him, but still, Alex didn't like it. He slowly walked inside the house watching Freddy pull away, taking his dope game with him.

Alex was impatient, angry and irritated at what had just happened between Freddy and him. The situation was eating him. He paced back and forth. Thoughts were flying through his head like flies at a picnic. *I can't trust him. He's going to make a move on me. I know him. I got to find out what the beef is. I got to find out!*

He grabbed his gun and double-checked for bullets. Full clip. He placed it back into his belt and adjusted his pants. He walked to the closet and grabbed a button up shirt before slipping it on and hitting the streets on foot.

“BOOM! Eight ball *homie!*” Chuy yelled inside the pool hall located in the eastside of town.

“Rack 'em up! I'm heading to the pisser, and when I come back, I may be generous enough to give you a second chance. Ha-Ha! Be back in a bit.”

“Don't forget to wash your hands! I don't want your voodoo piss sprinkles all over the table!”

“Ahh, screw you, *homie!* Just for saying that, I'm going to make sure and not use soap then. I'm gonna dry my hands on your shirt!”

Chuy walked away towards the restroom, laughing and shutting the door behind him.

He made his way to the urinal, chuckling at the *homies'* jokes while taking a leak. Once relieved and zipped

up, he turned back around and was surprised at Alex standing behind him.

“Damn, bro! I haven’t seen you in forever!” Chuy walked fast and gave Alex a big hug.

“Ey *cabron!* Wash your hands, you filthy *cholo!*” Alex said, pushing him off.

Chuy laughed and hurried towards the dirty, stained sink.

“Shit, their ain't no soap, *ése*, this time for real!”

The two sat at a table away from the pool game. Chuy ordered a bucket of beers on ice and was listening to Alex talk. He told Chuy about what just occurred with Freddy, everything, including the offer to let him go on the count of no revenge.

Chuy shook his head in disappointment. He had to break the news to Alex of what had been going down.

“Man, look here. Freddy has grown into his own addiction. The shit has gotten very deep with him. He started making big dollars using Silvio’s dope and customers.

"He raised the prices on the clients and didn't tell Silvio nothing. Made some serious *feria, ése*. Customers even tried to look for snow somewhere else but Freddy wasted one to set an example.

"Freddy snuck in a different connection. Snow, that holds a better taste and rush than what Silvio sells, real quality shit, people say.

"By the time Silvio caught wind and found out anything Freddy had paid him every penny of product and, was no longer in debt. He sent word to Silvio that he had another supplier and was cutting him off.

"Silvio didn't give a shit about losing Freddy until his customers followed Freddy. And I'm not talking about just the lower class from different barrio's, but the rich ones living in suburbs too. Fucking Freddy blind-sighted Silvio and handicapped his business.

"He started a war *ése*. One he thought he was ready for, but he surprised himself. Silvio is taking out Freddy's crew, one at a time and getting closer to

him. They say he's chopping them up and feeding them to the alligators in the swamps.

"Plus, he's got the laws on his payroll. Some of them are supposed to be doing the kidnapping. Freddy is starting to twist and get desperate. He even came at me to join his crew and help overpower Silvio.

"Now, the fight is between the two for clients and survival. I hear Freddy's not planning to back down either. He made some big deal to move serious weight for a Cartel back in Mexico.

"He's supposed to take over this town and more. Shit, if that *vato* can't full fill the contract, then he's going to be the one found chopped up and fed to the alligators in these swamps. That *vato's* got no choice but to beat Silvio!"

Alex listened, disappointed at what Chuy had just revealed to him. "This shit is deeper than I thought! Damn, Freddy isn't going to win against Silvio, no fucking way. That's why he came to me. I

never knew he had gotten into a plot this thick."

Chuy nodded in agreement. "He wanted your help to take out Silvio. He knows you can throw down with both your guns and brains."

Alex swallowed his beer in a single gulp, suds and all. "The cheap bastard tried to buy me with an envelope stuffed with five thousand dollars. Five thousand! After all we've been through and the deep shit he's in!"

He stood up, rubbed his fingers through his hair, frustrated and lit a cigarette.

"Well, homie, if it makes you feel any better, he didn't offer me no money. He didn't offer me shit! Damn, talk about cheap!" Chuy cracked.

Alex gave off a small laugh. He walked over and shook his boy's hand and gave him a quick hug.

"Even in bad times *ése*, you still know how to make people laugh. Thanks for the *cervezas bro, nos vemos.*"

"Wait." Chuy said. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing, Freddy's got it bad with Silvio right now. He doesn't have time for me. I'm the last of his worries. I'm just going to lay back, keep my distance and continue riding the road I been on. I'm through with all this bullshit. Only way I'll even touch it is if I have to."

Alex headed towards the pool hall's door.

"Alex!" Chuy yelled. "If anything ... you know."

"I'll call," Alex responded. "You know I will."

"You better invite me when you graduate *puto*. I heard you in school and still with that lady!"

Alex laughed as he exited and began walking back to Sandra's house.

The sun had begun to set. Alex had walked for almost an hour. He gazed at the sun, admiring the orange circle it painted on the dark blue sky, a beautiful view, like a painting. He turned to cut through an alley that would take him off

the busy streets and save him time before hitting the suburb neighborhood.

As he walked up ahead, he took notice of two cats spray-painting on the back of an old rundown building. Both looked young, maybe fifteen. They paused as Alex passed by but then knew it was all good after he gave them a *Q-Vo* nod.

Alex passed by, scoping out the graffiti the two were tagging. No gang signs or street claims; only a brown *mariachi* playing cartoon with the fancy words "Brown Pride" arched over the top. It was actually a good drawing. It was better than some of the gangster shit he would see on the walls with so many X-outs that after a while, no one could even read what the hell it said in the first place.

Alex stopped up ahead, a bush of bloomed white roses was hanging over the alley side of a fence in full reach. Sandra came to mind, a quick thought of how he felt for her made him smile. He

loved his woman, cherished her and wanted to show her how much he cared.

Alex picked the nicest one he could find then, turned back and walked towards the teens tagging on the wall some ten feet back.

“Ey, little homie,” Alex called.

Both teens stopped, one began to stuff his spray cans in his book bag quickly and Alex could see he was nervous.

“Whoa, hold up, little *vato*. I just want to ask for a favor, that’s all. Don’t sweat it. This ain't my turf.”

“*Orale*,” the other responded. “S' up?”

“Check it out, eh. Loan me some paint for a quick minute.”

“You want to tag up the wall too?”

“Nah, *vato*. That’s your artwork, just let me catch the brown paint.”

The tagging artist didn’t say anything, shrugged his shoulders and tossed Alex the can of Krylon spray paint. Alex took the can, aimed it at his white rose and gently misted the flower’s petals into a light brown shade.

"Damn, *ése*," the tagger admired. "It looks good. Looks like it hasn't been painted, all natural and clean. Who's it for?"

Alex laughed tossing back the can.

"For my lady, little homie. I picked up some skills tagging walls back in the day, but I'm passed that era. This one's for my lady, straight from the heart, eh?"

"*Orale*." The tagger said, nodding his head. "She's gonna like that, but why change the color?"

"Because little homie, she's my Pretty Brown Lady. She deserves a brown *rosa*."

---

As Alex walked up the driveway he saw Sandra's car in park.

*She's home.*

Sandra sat on the porch waiting and he could see her puffy eyes. He knew she had been crying.

*Damn, she knows what happened, neighbor must have said something. Fucking chismoso!*

He paused in front of her on the steps. She stood up, reaching her arms around and grasping his waist.

"I was so worried about you. Baby, are you okay?"

*Am I ok?* Alex thought surprisingly.

He was certain that she would have an angry reaction. He was expecting an argument that would have escalated into a fight. No telling what would happen, but Sandra's reaction was nowhere near anger.

She cared about him, that was for sure, she cared if he was hurt first, rather than, *What shit have you gotten into now?*

Alex never had a girl treat him like that before. He felt good, damn good. More than enough to keep him on the straight road he started on.

*She's a good woman. I feel blessed. Don't fuck this up!*

"Don't worry *mija*. I'm okay."

Sandra had a sad look in her eyes and Alex knew why. She was worried he did something crazy. Her hands began to avoid his lower back while she hugged him.

That was unusual. She always hugged him in that spot. It seemed to be her favorite.

*The gun, he thought. She knows I'm strapped. It's making her feel strange.*

Alex pulled back a little. He placed his hands on her face and looked into her eyes.

"Baby," he said. "Don't worry, I didn't do anything crazy."

Sandra broke out into tears. The feeling was a little too emotional for her. She was too worried about him. She held him in her arms. She hated the risky feeling of losing him in any way. She loved him and wasn't afraid to show it.

"Hey, come on. No tears, okay?" He reached into his back pocket. "Look, I made this for you."

Sandra took the rose in her hand. She smiled at Alex, "I didn't know they had brown roses."

"Well," Alex said as she began to sniff the rose.

"Oh," she said, smiling after smelling the paint fumes. "You really did make it."

Alex felt a little embarrassed. He forgot about the fact that she may try and take a whiff of the rose. "I should have sprayed some perfume on it," he said.

Sandra shook her head, "It's the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. It's very beautiful. I love it and, I love you."

Alex held her tight. A tear rolled out his eye as the two embraced one another.

*Damn, I never felt this before. What the hell am I going to do if Freddy comes for me?*

“Here man, on the house. Get some food while you study. All right?” Esteban, the owner of *Casa Mia* restaurant said to Alex, handing him a plate of food.

He gave Alex a job with flexible hours for school as a favor to Sandra, his niece.

He grew to like Alex and even though he tried hard not to pile so much work on him. Alex would still come in and keep his responsibility of doing both his job and studying. He would do it even at times when the dirty dish’s piled so high that it took almost three hours to finish cleaning the mess.

His shift had ended and Alex sat to study in a quiet corner of the restaurant. He needed the extra concentration for his upcoming exam.

He buried his head in the book, squinting his eyes and fought to make out the words beneath the dim light.

*Man, he thought, kind of hard to see.*

He picked his head up, reached for his soda then, took notice of the silhouette of a man hovering over towards his table.

He held a serious look on his face, leader like, wearing a simple white button-up shirt with matching creased pants and a pair of Stacy Adams. His hair was slick and his well-trimmed goatee had a touch of grey. A tinted pair of prescription glasses sat on his face that gave off his O.G look.

Two bodyguards joined on each of his side. Alex knew just by the diamond pinky ring, this man could have been no other than Silvio.

Both bodyguards walked up and sat on each of Alex's side. Silvio sat down in the chair directly in front. He pulled Alex's schoolbook and fanned through a few pages.

"It's good to see you're dedicated," Silvio said.

His voice carried a low tone, almost mafia like. "Word in the air is that you aren't fucking around with your new path in life."

Alex's heart raced. He heard of all the things Silvio had done. He was a crazy old school *vato* who took care of business, one who was respected by some, yet feared by many.

He played the dope game long enough and made it his set income. The man had made his own map and no one had ever succeeded in taking his turf. Alex began to picture a coffin in the back of his mind.

He kept his cool, didn't say a word.

He let Silvio speak. After all, a man like him is one who demands respect no matter what.

Silvio looked Alex dead in his eye and Alex refused to turn away. He showed no fear, couldn't. Otherwise, Silvio wouldn't respect him. "What do you want with me, Silvio?" he asked.

"Nothing," Silvio replied. "I just wanted to thank you for not insulting me

by taking the envelope that Freddy offered you the other day, before you laid him out. Show's you made good judgment."

His response was chilling. Alex had heard that Silvio was a slick man and patient when it came to his enemies. He would wait for them to slip and catch them on their way down, taking his revenge.

A gun cocked. Alex looked out the corner of his eye. One of Silvio's guards was aiming a *cuete* underneath the table. The other began to pat Alex on his back. Alex raised his arm to avoid any physical contact.

"Relax, Alex," Silvio said. "Relax, all we want to do is see if you're carrying anything."

"I'm clean *ése*. I got no reason to carry."

Silvio smiled.

"I sure hope you don't."

He looked at his man. The guard gave off an okay nod.

“So you’re good, nice and clean. I’m glad to see that. But your boy Freddy can get a little too relaxed sometimes. I think it’s his downfall, always has been. Now, it got him so deep in a hole that he won’t ever reach the top. I heard you gave him one hell of a punch, dropped him on his ass.”

Alex sat back in his chair.

*Damn, this vato knows about Freddy and me?*

“How did you know about that?”

Silvio laughed.

“One of your neighbors in the suburbs is still my customer. If I wasn’t out of town that day, I would have killed two birds with one stone.” Silvio handed Alex back his book.

“Good thing I was out of town because my judgment was off. I was damn sure about Freddy, but not about you. I like to be certain of the people I kill. I heard about all the times you’ve taken his back and collected his cash. You’ve got good thoughts, know how to think fast, makes me question who’s

really running the show between you two.”

“Those days are over, Silvio.”

“Yeah, so I hear you’re doing good and going to school now, even got a good woman. Sandra takes good care of you, eh?”

Alex remained calm even though he could feel his blood boil inside hotter than a coffee pot. He knew Silvio mentioned her name as a friendly threat. Silvio wanted to see Alex’s reaction. He liked to play games. It was his way of testing people.

*Don’t blow up, ése. Just chill, forget about it. He’s fucking with your head.*

“Yeah, she is a good girl, one I really admire being with.”

Silvio smiled, “I know the feeling. I used to have a good woman too. Her name was Carla. She was a beautiful woman. I lost her, left me a year ago. It’s nothing I like to bring up, just a little something I have that can relate to you.”

Alex slid in closer to Silvio, across the table.

“Why did you come to see me?”

“I guess you’re right, enough with the chit-chat. You know, school can get pretty expensive. It even makes some people quit when they can’t afford it. I too, have an envelope, if you’re interested. But my envelope has to be carried in a briefcase with, Freddy’s name on it.”

Silvio placed a briefcase on top of the table, burying Alex’s book underneath. He opened it up and showed Alex a display of money laid out across in tempting view. Alex took a deep breath.

“It’s thirty-thousand cash; five-thousand per every letter of Freddy’s name. All you have to do is convince him to meet me for a talk. I’ll take care of the rest. ”

“Why can’t you talk to Freddy yourself?”

“Well, you see, the fucker is slick. He avoids me and let’s just say he is making it hard for me to find him. I know that you can find him and all I want, is for him to come talk to me.”

“I don’t know where he is, Silvio.”

“Well, you don’t even have to talk to him if it bothers you. Just tell me where he’s hiding.”

“Like I said, I don’t know where he is.”

Alex stared at the money for a second. He leaned over and placed both hands on the top of the briefcase, shut it slowly then, turned it facing Silvio, and pushed it back his way.

“Silvio,” he said. “With all due respect, I have to decline your offer. I want nothing to do with the situation that you and Freddy are in. Thanks, but no thanks.”

Silvio smiled.

“Good,” he said. “Very good.”

He reached into his backside, pulled out a snub nose revolver and opened the chamber dropping a single bullet on the table.

Silvio picked up the bullet and tossed it across for Alex to catch. Alex held it in his hand with a look of confusion at Silvio.

“Take a good look at it.”

Alex eyed the hollow-point bullet, one that would shatter the insides of any person it pierced. He twisted it and noticed on the brass casing that his name was engraved down the side.

Silvio laughed, "I carved your name on it, just for you."

Alex clinched the bullet.

*Fucker was going to shoot me, probably still is!*

"You see my men sitting next to you? Take a good look."

Alex crawled his eyes down toward his lower half. Each man had his guns aiming at Alex's stomach area. His heart began to race and he took a huge gulp as the thought of death rolled around his head.

"Last chance," Silvio said. "I tried to make you a generous offer and you turned it down. Well, I guess now I have to offer your life instead of cash. Tell me where Freddy is."

Alex paused, looked away to the side and then stared Silvio dead in his eye. He

took the bullet Silvio gave him and tossed it back his way.

"Here," he said. "Why don't you put it back in your *cuete*, and pull the trigger yourself? I don't know anything, Freddy and I fell out and I got my own game plan now. Taking me out of this world won't get you any further."

Silvio stood in thought for a minute then signaled his men to lower their guns with a simple nod.

"No worries, *ése*. Only one way that bullet was meant for you and that was if, you had said yes to my briefcase offer. Then I would know that you were ready for betrayal. And if you have the heart to take out your best homie, then who's to say you weren't going to come at me next. Not only that, you show that you're willing to die for your word. I guess I have no other choice but to believe you and respect that.

"Now, I know you're truly dedicated to your new life. Wise decision and rest assure, I will not come after you. My heart is at ease. You got my word. Now,

don't make me break it. Let's just say you passed my test. I don't kill anyone who doesn't deserve it. But if I find out your hanging with Freddy, I'm going to slice your gut open and feed you to the alligators alive!"

He pulled another bullet out his pocket, opened the chamber and placed it inside. Alex froze.

"This one, is for Freddy. I have his name on it too, just like yours. Except the fact is, no way Freddy can avoid this bullet the way you have."

Silvio and his men stood up. He handed Alex a card with his cell-phone number on it.

"Just in case you find out where he's at. You never know, maybe in the future, I'll be doing you a favor."

Alex put the number in his pocket. He didn't want to disrespect Silvio.

"Good luck in school. Hope everything works out well and, don't cry too much at Freddy's funeral, you know he had it coming."

Silvio and his entourage walked out of the restaurant leaving Alex sitting at the table in disbelief at what just happened.

~8~

Freddy gripped the leather steering wheel of his car, angry and irritated while gazing through the alley's pavement and dumpsters. He never felt more betrayed in his life.

"I knew Alex was with Silvio. I knew that *puto* went behind my back and turned on me. All it took was for him to slip and get caught! What else did you see?"

A guy was standing outside Freddy's car, glancing over his shoulder to see if anyone was around, a snitch. He was one that Freddy had on his payroll ever since he knew Alex had started working at the *Casa Mia* restaurant. He lost trust in Alex

after the mouth punch and peace offer. He needed to keep an eye on him even when he wasn't looking.

"Nothing man. I was waiting tables in my section. Like I said, 'I couldn't hear anything,' but they were definitely holding a deep conversation. They talked for maybe twenty-minutes. He's definitely rolling with Silvio. Now, how about that money you promised?"

Freddy reached down the side of his seat.

"Nobody followed you right?"

The waiter looked behind him, again.

"No, man! Come on. Pay me so I can go."

Freddy pulled out a wad of one hundred-dollar bills.

"Look here," he said.

The waiter leaned inside Freddy's car.

"One, two, three, four..."

He pulled his head back out the car, distracted. He could hear footsteps creeping up behind him. He turned around and ... Bang!

A gunshot ripped through the back of his skull, sending his brains scattering through the air. Freddy shook his head hanging out the car looking down at the dead waiter.

“You should have double-checked to see if you were followed, *pendejo!*”

Get in the car, *ése.*” Freddy ordered his gunman.

The two rode away, leaving the dead body out for the coroner.

“Fucking *puto!* I knew that bitch was going to screw me over! I fucking knew it!”

Freddy was yelling, now he felt betrayed and worse, lost out on a chance to kill Alex when his crew was aiming a shotgun dead at him.

Freddy became desperate. *The two are going to find a way to catch me slipping! Got to do something soon, can't let Silvio win this battle!*

A Motel-Six was sitting off the feeder road on Hwy. 73. Freddy had a room checked out for his safety. He couldn't stay at the home, he was renting out by

the suburbs. It was too risky and scared the shit out of him.

He knew that Silvio had spies and for sure, must have already pin-pointed where Freddy was living. He felt hunted and with the latest news about Alex, it put him at a victim state of mind.

The two pulled into a motel room and set their guns on the table. Freddy parked his car in the empty space next door, hoping to confuse anybody that wanted to pull a *kick-door* move.

“Call the others!” Freddy ordered. “Tell them to come strapped down more than a fucking army! Alex is going to regret the day he turned against me!”

The clock read 3 a.m. Freddy and one of his gunmen were sitting at the motel table, downing a bottle of tequila and chain-smoking cigarettes. Freddy was strung out on snow. He lost it and became addicted to it. His eyes were blood-shot red and his hands trembled with the rush twitching his temples at every heart’s racing pace.

Freddy dumped the rest of the eight ball coke onto the table's glass surface. He took his rolled hundred-dollar bill and snorted up a thick line that made him jump and rub his nose vigorously at the numbing feeling.

"Where are these fuckers? I said to hurry up!" Freddy spat. "Call them again!"

He walked to the window of the room and just as he began to touch the curtain, a parade of gunshots sounded, screaming through the air.

Freddy hit the floor like a ton of bricks.

*Holy Shit!*

Windows shattering and loud banging had him closing his eyes and dragging his body quickly through carpet towards the restroom floor.

He squatted by the bathtub, gripping and trembling his chrome toy as the bullets echoed in his ears. His breathing grew heavy as he wiped the sweat off his forehead. He cocked a round into the chamber.

Suddenly, the shooting stopped.

*Fuck!*

Freddy jumped to cut off the light and squatted down in a corner to take aim at anybody that would open the restroom door.

*Come on you motherfuckers, come on! I'm going to waist the first bitch that steps inside!*

A couple of minutes had passed. Freddy was still sitting in the dark with his ear wide open. He couldn't hear anything, not even his gunman. Freddy was starting to get the feeling that he was dead.

*They left. Freddy thought. Had to, no way they would hang around this long.*

Freddy crawled placing his ear against the door.

*No noise, they did leave. Fernando's dead!*

His heart began to race. The tips of his fingers were tapping the door's handle. Sweat poured down his face as he palmed the whole doorknob.

*Blast these bitches.*

Quickly, he yanked it open and jumped out taking aim throughout the room.

Freddy lowered his gun.

*What the fuck?*

To his surprise, Fernando was standing at the window peeking out the curtain while Freddy was looking around the untouched room.

“They got the wrong room, *ése*.” Fernando said, collecting his things. “We gotta bail before the *chota* shows up.”

Freddy grasped the gun in his hand fearing they may return. He walked into the room next door. Destroyed, bullet holes sprayed everywhere like an explosion of confetti.

The room was vacant, so no casualties were risked. Freddy’s instincts of not parking his car in front of his room, had saved his ass.

“Silvio got the wrong room *ése*. I watched them fools pull away! Silvio was in the back seat with the window rolled down, smiling and sitting pretty! Fuck

that *puto!*" Fernando said, pumped with rage.

*Idiot!* Freddy thought.

Sirens were growing closer. Freddy and his boy jumped into the car, guns and all. Freddy began to pull out of the parking lot.

"Hang on, *ése!*"

Fernando made Freddy stop the car at the motel clerk's office. He jumped out and ran inside.

Suddenly, a popping gunshot was heard and Freddy jumped back at the flashing light. Fernando came running back into the car.

"I also saw Silvio talking to this piece of shit. He must have called him and snitched us out. *Pendejo!* Got the wrong room too!"

Freddy screeched his tires out of the parking lot.

"Let's go blast these fools, *ése!*" he yelled.

“Thanks for the ride, *ése!* I’ll be out in an hour,” Alex told Esteban.

“Good luck on your test!” he yelled as Alex began to jog his way towards his class.

He walked in, right on time to take hold of the last seat before the professor closed the door.

His mind was racing, pumping his brains with pure positive adrenaline.

*I studied hard for this test, I know I’m ready. I have to be ready.*

“I’m gonna pass this bitch!” he yelled.

The class became silent and all eyes were on Alex.

*Shit, didn’t realize I said that out loud!*

Alex smiled it off. He pulled out his pencil and notes for one last look-over,

trying to brand every word he could into his memory.

His heart was thumping. He felt good, ready, and confident that he was going to pass. If it was true about all the hard work paying off, then this was going to be his payday.

Nothing was going to stop him. No thoughts of Freddy and Silvio drama, no thoughts of any distractions whatsoever. Not even Sandra, the lady he'd fallen in love with. This test was not only for his future, but also for himself. He had pride for accomplishing something, finally something that had value.

"Put everything up. Only pencils on your desk," the professor said, as he walked around the room.

Alex took his notes. He opened his book bag and speed-read the last couple of pages, while placing them inside.

He took a second look, something in his book bag caught his eye, a note, rolled like a diploma with a ribbon wrapped around it. *What the hell is this?*

Alex pulled it out and slid the ribbon off. He immediately recognized Sandra's handwriting.

*Mi amor,  
Just know that I am proud of  
you for making it this far.*

*I have always believed in you  
and I know that you've worked  
so hard for this test. If there is  
anything, and I mean anything  
that I want from you, then it is  
this-.....*

"Put everything up, Mr. Perez," the professor interrupted Alex's reading.

Alex took Sandra's note, rolled it up tightly and put it back into his book bag.

*I'll read it on the down-low, when he's  
not looking.*

The professor walked around his class, took out his briefcase and began handing out his test.

"Good luck to you all," he said.

The music was playing and Sandra bounced around her home, dancing and smiling at her favorite *cumbia* hits.

She dressed herself in her nurse's uniform, and sat at her dresser to put on her makeup. As she searched for her lipstick, a shadowy glimpse ran by catching her sight. Sandra froze. A chill crawled up her spine.

*What was that?*

Her ears perked up and she listened past the music for any unusual sound.

She stood up slowly, creaking the wooden floorboards as she moved to her bedroom's entrance. Slowly, she poked out her head. She looked left, then right, nothing. There was no sight of any unusual objects or, an intruder lurking around her home as she stood, alone.

Sandra walked back to her dresser.

*Probably just the wind. I don't want to be late.*

She picked up the lipstick and juggled it in her hand, losing control and dropping it on the floor.

She reached down to pick it up. A gun sounded behind her, cocking a bullet into the chamber. Sandra froze for a brief second.

"Get up," a voice growled.

She stood up, looked in the mirror and saw Freddy's eyes aiming dead at her. Sandra turned around slowly. Freddy took a few steps closer, her heart raced, her palms grew sweaty and Sandra could see the gun's barrel crawl down her body and stop at her stomach.

"Please," she said. "Please don't do this."

He stood there, watching her plead. An ounce of sympathy made him hesitate but he shook it off.

"You were the one who turned him against me. I guess it is true. A female can come between two *homitos*."

Sandra wanted to disagree with Freddy but she was afraid. She'd seen that look before on drug addicts in her hospital. He didn't look well. She stood frozen, scared that he would lose control. She watched Freddy's stone cold eyes and red nostrils flare with every breath he took.

His hair was drenched in sweat and his head gave off a little fast twitch with every heart's racing beat. He was strung out, bad. So bad that Sandra began to hear his teeth grind as his lower jaw moved sideways.

"You think I want to do this? Alex is going to kill me! I know about him and Silvio joining forces to take me down. They had a sweet plot. Gonna be just him and Silvio, living in wealth with you, his bitch!

"His *hyna* bitch, right by his side and living in a big house and pool with fancy rides. You want that? While my body rots away six feet under in some fucking pine box and grave spot that everyone will forget about?

"Hell, no! It ain't going down like that. I'm going to put some hurt in his life but first, I'll start at the root of where it all started, you, the bitch he fell in love with!"

"Freddy, please, he wasn't ..."

"Your fairy tale is over, bitch!"

---

The door swung open and Alex jumped out of Esteban's car while it was still moving. His heart pounded and his feet hit the pavement in full-speed, zipping through the police and ambulance's red and blue flashing lights surrounding Sandra's home.

"Shit!" someone yelled. "Grab him!"

Two police officers broke loose behind Alex, catching him by the arms and stopping him from coming any closer to the crime scene.

"What the fuck happened?" he yelled.

"Where is she? Sandra, Sandra!" he called to his lady, anxiously hoping that

she would call back with any noise; a cry, a scream, anything to let him know that she was okay.

“Take him to the car,” one cop said to the other.

Both dragged Alex forcefully, kicking a patrol car and leaned him against the door. One cop stood in front of him making sure he didn’t move an inch.

The suspense was killing him, the wait was torture and the next few minutes seemed to drag like a food stamp line. All Alex could do was anxiously await and see the outcome of the horror that had just happened to Sandra, the lady he’d grown to love and changed his life forever. He glued his eyes to the front door knob as it began to creak open.

The front door swung open and Alex could see two paramedics rolling out a stretcher, using a white sheet to cover Sandra’s dead body. The view hit him like a ton of bricks.

“No!” Alex yelled. “No!”

His tears came rolling. Alex pulled hard, twisted and broke free from the cops, running toward the stretcher.

"Hey!" the officers yelled.

Suddenly, his *homito* Chuy came dashing out of nowhere, grabbed Alex and kept him away from Sandra, using every ounce of his strength.

"Let me go!" Alex yelled. "It can't be her! Let me go, *puto!*" Chuy held tighter, Alex looked at Sandra's body being rolled away. Blood painted the white sheet, reminding him of the fact that she was dead.

His raging anger overpowered Chuy. He pushed his homeboy back, swinging a punch and striking Chuy dead sideways across the jaw.

Chuy fell to his knees, shook it off and leaped forward, tackling Alex to the ground. A tear began to brew in Chuy's eyes and he could feel the pain, while he hugged his *homito* hard.

"He killed her!" Alex yelled, "The motherfucker killed my lady."

He paused as the reality sank in, putting knots in his stomach and lumps in his throat. He buried his face in his palms and sat on the front lawn in pure disbelief and hurt.

Chuy wrapped both arms around Alex. His eyes burst with tears as he saw the paramedics haul Sandra's body into the back of the ambulance.

"I'm sorry, bro. I'm sorry." He choked out his words to his *homito* but knew there was nothing he could say to help.

Alex wept, he wept harder than he ever had in his life. "She's gone, *ése!*" He yelled. "The motherfucker took out my lady! He killed my lady, *mi hyna!* He killed my Sandra! I love her, *ése*. I always loved her!"

~11~

Two days had passed and Alex stood in the front of the dresser in Sandra's room. He gazed at his reflection in the mirror,

making a quick tie adjustment, while reminiscing about Sandra. A tear began to bubble in his eyes.

The phone rang breaking Alex's concentration. He made his way over to sit on the corner of the bed.

"Hello," he answered. "Hey bro, it's Chuy. How you holding up?"

"I'm all right, *ése*. I'm just trying to find the right steps for the funeral, you know. Hey, umm look, I'm sorry about your jaw *homie*. You're like my brother and I shouldn't-

"Hey," Chuy interrupted. "Don't sweat that shit. It's understandable. You just chill okay? Don't go off and trip anywhere that may get you in a bad situation."

Alex remained quiet for a few seconds.

"Well, I guess I'll see you at the funeral then."

"Hold on *ése*! Look, I'm only telling you this because I was asked to. Silvio wanted me to pass his apologies for your loss. He wants to assure you that he had

nothing to do with it and he's offering to pay for Sandra's funeral."

Alex remained quiet. It was bad enough that Sandra was already gone. And now, sudden reminders of her being dead wasn't helping his pain go away.

Silvio's offer was maybe generous to him, but angering to Alex. The way he saw it, Silvio was just one of the reasons that Sandra was no longer with him.

"Alex, you still there?"

"Yeah, tell Silvio I said 'thanks, but no thanks.' I know it wasn't him."

"I will, but that's not all. They found a body the other night, one of Freddy's snitches. Word on the street is that Freddy got word of your little meeting with Silvio, that's supposed to be the reason he came at you. He thought that you and Silvio was partners and had plans to take him out. Well, actually, he still thinks the two of you are together."

Alex heard enough.

"Find out where Freddy is hanging."

"Why?"

“Just do it! And I’ll meet you at the funeral.”

Alex hung up the phone.

He stood off the bed and started to make his way out the door. Suddenly, he heard a faint laugh, Sandra’s laugh.

He turned around slowly, a memory of her appeared. She was pretty, still pretty and wearing a brown dress that matched her skin tone. Everything about her was the same, her eyes, her lips, her beauty, all as if she had never been harmed.

She sat on the bed where the two used to hold one another in their arms, smiling and gazing at her man.

She put her soft lips together, blew a small kiss and whispered the words, “I love you,” before slowly fading away.

A tear rolled down Alex’s face. Sandra’s memory was loving, but painful. His temper began to boil at the thought of her being taken from him in cold-murder. It was eating at him.

*Fuck! She’s not supposed to be dead!*

Freddy had made a mistake, a deadly mistake and screwed over Alex's life out of a misunderstanding? It wasn't right, possible, but not right.

*He should have come at me, not her.*

Alex wiped his angry tears and walked over to his top dresser drawer. He reached inside and grabbed the wooden handle of his chrome nine-mil.

He pulled the clip, checked for bullets and loaded a round into the chamber, ready for poetic justice.

*Puto's going to pay!* He marched out the room and shoved his chrome toy inside his book bag.

*I'm going to make him pay with his life!*

He thought picking up the phone and dialed the number Silvio had given him at the restaurant.

Thoughts of Sandra were floating in Alex's mind, while cries and sniffles echoed in the air throughout the funeral. Alex could remember her voice in his head.

*"Sandra, sometimes I don't even know why you're with me."*

*"Why? Because I've fallen in love with you, everything about you."*

*"How could you love me? I don't have nothing to offer you. I got no money, no high-paying job, not even a car. My life can flip into pure chaos..."*

*"Shhh. Don't say anything else. I'm not with you for materials. I'm with you because you're responsible, loving, caring, determined, and everything else I could ask for in a man. Just know that I love you with all my heart and I'm happy to be with you, and no one else."*

The priest stood over her wooden coffin, giving his last blessing. All Alex could hear was mumbling.

His mind was drifting away, away from his loss and into a growing rage at feeling responsible for losing Sandra. He wanted to yell, kick, punch, anything that would grant him an ounce of relief from his anger.

*Not here, ése. Not here.* He thought to himself, trying to control his temper.

Sandra's coffin began to lower into the earth, the last goodbye.

"No! My daughter! No!"

A scream sounded through the air.

Alex turned his red eyes and saw Sandra's mother was in tears, hugging her husband and shaking her head in disappointment and hurt.

A knot grew in Alex's throat. Tears poured out and Alex fell to his knee. "I'm sorry!" he yelled. "Baby, I'm sorry. I should have protected you!"

Esteban rushed toward Alex through the crowd. He kneeled down and wrapped his arms around him. "Be

strong, man. It's not your fault, you did nothing wrong. She loved you. Be strong."

Alex jerked, in mourning loss for a few seconds. He wiped his tears and began to stand up. Esteban helped him to his feet and started to walk him away from the grave.

"I'm okay," he whispered. "I have to give her something."

He turned back and reached her burial, stood still and watched her coffin lower gently into the hole. A sniffle grew in his sinuses. He reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out her brown rose, the one he gave her a few days back. He remembered how much she loved the rose. *I'll never forget, but it needs to be with you.*

Alex laid a soft kiss on the dry petals and tossed it on top of her coffin. "I love you, Sandra. I will always love you. Goodbye, my Pretty Brown lady."

He wiped his tears, looked away and walked towards Chuy's car.

The crowd began to leave. Chuy met up with Alex leaning up against his car.

“You need a ride, bro?”

“No, I have her car.” Alex responded, pointing to Sandra’s blue Honda.

“How you holding up?”

“Ok, thanks for everything. Now, where is he?”

Chuy hesitated. He didn’t want to tell Alex what he knew but holding back anything wouldn’t help either. He knew Alex. He knew that he would find out one way or another. Chuy wanted to keep him, at least on a reasonable side.

“His at the carwash over on Seventh Street, got his boys with him too. They all strapped.”

Alex walked fast towards Sandra’s car.

“Alex!” Chuy yelled.

“Hold up bro!” Alex jumped in the car, not wanting to hear anything. Chuy gave chase.

“Alex! Hear me out!”

He started the engine.

“My mind is made up *ése!*” he yelled pulling away and heading over towards Freddy and his crew.

~13~

“It’s going to be a nice pay day *homies.*” Freddy chanted out loud. The four stood at the carwash, laughing, bumpin’ oldies and cleaning the BMW, while Freddy awaited his buyer to show up.

Freddy grew confident. The message he sent out to Alex and Silvio by taking out Sandra gave him assurance that he could crawl out of the dark and back on his feet.

He was certain that Alex wouldn’t try anything on the day Sandra was laid to rest. It would show disrespect, and he was certain that Silvio wouldn’t risk stepping foot onto Freddy’s original barrio turf.

"We need to shine those rims to mirror *ése* because after we get paid, we gonna go pimp game through the city! Shit, might even take a trip to Houston!"

Laughs were heard as one of Freddy's boys spotted something suspicious.

"Look Freddy."

Freddy turned around and faced the spotlight on the corner. A blue Honda was sitting and waiting for the light to turn green, Sandra's car. Freddy could see Alex's face stare dead at him through the windshield.

"Strap up *homies*, as soon as this fucker goes on green, we're gonna start blasting!"

Freddy walked to his car, he pulled out his nine-mil *cuete* while his crew armed their artillery.

"Wait 'till he starts blasting first. If anything, I bet he's gonna punk out!"

All stood, waiting. Alex sat in the driver's seat. His eyes grew narrow and his hand gripped the wheel. He glanced at the light, still red.

The passenger side window slid down, giving open access for Alex to shoot the motherfuckers. His heart pounded and his rage boiled.

Alex reached inside his book bag searching for his chrome-nine and tapped down on the gas pedal.

The light turned green. Cars drove off but Alex stayed at the light in a stand-still. Everyone stood, watching.

"Is he going to move or what?" one of Freddy's homies asked.

Freddy grew nervous. His heart raced and his hand gripped the gun while his finger rubbed on the trigger.

*Come on you bitch. Let's see if you have the balls!*

Tires screeched, Freddy jumped back lifting his gun and taking aim. His boys began to cock their guns as their attention was turned at Alex and the blue car burning rubber.

Alex drove forward then, shifted the car into a sudden U-turn.

*What the hell is he doing?* Freddy thought.

“Hold on homies!”

Alex drove away in the opposite direction. Freddy rushed his way to the street and saw him driving off. A sigh of relief came over him and a grin grew on his face. *Pussy*.

He raised his arms at his crew, laughed and tossed his gun onto his car’s luxury seat. “No worries *vatos!* The fool is a straight out punk. Just playing mind games. I should have known!”

Freddy’s crew began to laugh and also put their guns away. The tension was fading. Freddy cheered in victory. “We aint got no reason to be scared of that *puto!* He knows better than to fuck with us. I told you *vatos!* I told you, he’s a straight punk, scared!”

“But we're not!” Silvio’s voice yelled behind Freddy and his boys.

Freddy’s stomach dropped. He felt his knees grow weak but managed to stand strong. All four of them turned around and saw Silvio with three armed men standing behind them and taking aim.

Silvio and his crew had crept up from behind, when no one was looking. He caught Freddy slipping just in time, right after they tossed their guns back inside the BMW.

The anxiety rose and all eyes were on the others, waiting for someone to make a move.

“Fuck it!” Freddy yelled, diving towards his gun.

Silvio pulled the trigger and fired a bullet ripping through his knee. Freddy’s crew ran for their weapons, while Silvio’s opened fire, blasting them left and right, spraying the piercing bullets. Freddy crawled on the ground like a dog, trying to avoid any gunshots.

Silvio raised his hand, ordering his crew to stop shooting. He walked up to Freddy kicking around empty shell casings that covered the pavement.

“Fuck you! Fuck you and Alex. You two motherfuckers are not going to last!” Freddy yelled in his shaken voice.

Silvio aimed his gun at Freddy’s head. He could see the fear in his eyes.

“You never pay attention or even try to learn anything. You fucked up in trying to ruin me, and what’s worse, you killed an innocent lady. I want you to know that Alex had nothing to do with me. He’s been on the straight road since the day he dropped you. You deserve this bullet.”

Freddy raised his arm as a protective shield. Silvio pulled the trigger, blasting the hollow point cap through his skull and sending his brains splattered across the pavement, killing him execution style.

Silvio, opened the spinning chamber of the snub nose chrome revolver, the same one he showed Alex at the *Casa Mia* restaurant. He dumped the smoking bullet-shell on Freddy, rolling it off his dead body and onto the pavement ground, displaying the name, *Freddy*. Silvio grinned at the sweet taste of his enemy's name engraved with his own hands.

“Let’s go.” Silvio said, climbing into the back seat of the four-door luxury truck.

The driver put the gear into drive and pulled away. Silvio gave off a sigh, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

“Call Alex,” he told one of his guys. “Tell him I said, 'thanks' for the info on this piece of shit. I just ended this problem.” Silvio handed over his cell phone to his man.

Alex drove down the street some three miles away. Sirens were blaring. He could see ambulances and patrol cars zipping past him heading towards Freddy and his dead crew.

He pulled over to give way, looked at the passenger seat and into his book bag. He eyed at something past the gun's wooden handle. *Her note?*

He reached inside and pulled out Sandra's note, the one he never finished reading when he first saw it in class.

His eyes crawled down the last few sentences of her letter. He sighed, knowing that he'll always miss, and never forget her.

*No matter what happens, no matter how horrible you think it is or how tough a situation can get, always, always remember that I believe in you. Promise me you'll never give up. Promise me, you'll always continue, no matter what. I love you, always, mi amor!*

*Sandra.*

The cell phone rang and Alex recognized Silvio's number on the caller I.D.

"Yeah," he answered.

"Mr. Silvio says, 'thank you' for not interfering with the problem and directing it to his attention."

Alex gripped Sandra's note in his hand.

"Tell Silvio that my hands are washed, and from this day forward, will always remain clean."

He hung up the phone, took Sandra's note and placed it inside his coat pocket, next to his loving heart. "I promise, I'll never give up Sandra. I promise *mi amor*,

my Sandra, my very own, Pretty Brown  
Lady," he whispered.

*-The End-*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Growing up in the *barrios* of Port Arthur TX, Genaro Lucio Zamora has been writing since the age of 10. He dedicates this book to the love of his life, his wife and very own *Pretty Brown*.

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