

Daniela Petrova
from *Stolen*

The new owner showed up with three other guys quite early in the evening. The bronze bells in the newly renovated church down the street had just counted out six o'clock, but the June sun was still pretty high in the sky. In the public garden next-door mothers still pushed their strollers and grandmothers chatted on benches while their grandchildren played in the sand box or swung on the swings. Two shirtless gypsy men with scythes in hand were cutting the grass in between the asphalt pathways. A wooden horse cart stood under a cluster of white birch trees where the horse grazed, his tail vigorously swinging back and forth to chase away the flies. The new parliament had passed a law prohibiting the gypsies from driving their horse carts in the center of town but this area, although not deep in the projects, wasn't exactly the belly button of the city. The people waiting at the streetcar's stop across the street seemed to be all watching the spectacle, shaking their heads, but the truth of the matter was—it was a good arrangement. The government didn't have money to cut the grass in the parks and gardens outside the immediate center of the city, and the gypsies needed the hay for their horses.

Our new owner was one of the Bulgarian nouveau riche who'd recently flooded Sofia—old Communist leaders from the provinces who'd made a killing during the land restitution. And he looked the part—short, balding, with a beer belly and a graying mustache. It wasn't hard to see the peasant under the Italian designer suit. He had left undone the top four buttons of his shirt, making sure we wouldn't miss the oversized golden cross nestled in his thick chest hair. A heavy gold watch sparkled on his thick wrist. One of his friends was also in a suit, though clearly a cheap one, while the other two guys wore Adidas tracksuits and looked like *mutri*. We called mafia guys *mutri* because of their mugs—the short thick neck, the buzz cut, the jaw sticking out.

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In the early years after the fall of Communism, it was the wrestlers who formed the mafia. While the high-ranked communists took advantage of their positions to plunder the national capital and invest it in private businesses, the wrestlers capitalized on their muscles and very handy skills. Ex-wrestlers or not, all the mafia guys now looked the same way. I didn't like seeing any of them in our restaurant (usually, they frequented the chic nightclubs and bars in the Center of town). But what worried me most was that they were here with our new boss. Was he in business with the mafia?

I was serving the drinks on the table next to theirs when with my peripheral vision I saw the owner snap his fingers. Like a faithful genie, Nikolai materialized in front of him. He'd been standing by the kitchen tonight, surveying the place and the staff in a way I'd never seen him do before.

"Who's the tall brunette?" I heard the voice of the owner behind me and stiffened.

"Katerina," said Nikolai.

"And why is Katerina not waiting on us?" Judging by his soft accent, he came from the Southwestern parts of Bulgaria.

I put down the glass of wine a bit too abruptly and scurried away. But there was no getting out of it. Nikolai had me take over their table while their server—a petite woman in her early thirties—took not one but two of my tables in exchange. Nikolai wanted to make sure I could give the VIP table my full attention. And they surely needed it. They ordered drinks and food for ten, beginning with a course of salad and five different kinds of *meze*: an eggplant dish with garlic, calf tongue fried in butter, fried calf brain, forest mushrooms in butter, and fried baby potatoes with dill. For dinner they asked for our signature dish—chunks of lamb and vegetables grilled on a ceramic tile. Before the main course had arrived, they had drunk two

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bottles of our most expensive *slivovitz*, the Bulgarian brandy made of plums. With the dinner, they ordered three bottles of French wine.

While I served them, the owner gave me exceedingly greasy looks, grinning under his mustache and nodding. Or he'd pause in mid-sentence and look me up and down and then grunt approvingly to his friends right in front of me. I would have had a hard time putting up with it in normal circumstances but on an evening like this—when I should have been home studying—I could barely restrain my anger. My only hope was that my last two weeks of work wouldn't be like this. The old owner rarely came and when he did, it was during the day, to check on the books and talk to Nikolai. This guy was here for a third time already this week. I'd heard the other girls talking that he was an old creep but I hadn't paid it much attention.

I was clearing the empty mezza dishes when I felt his hand up one of my thighs like a slimy snake. I pulled back in horror but he leaned forward holding onto me, a big grin pushing up the corners of his mustache. I clamped his wrist with my free hand.

“Be a good girl now,” he said, his hand pushing up my thigh even as I held him.

I glanced around me. People ate and drank and laughed merrily. A cheesy pop-folk song blasted from the speakers. Nikolai was looking straight at me with a smirk on his face. It wasn't unheard of in our business for a drunken client to grab your ass, but this was different. This was the owner. What did he think? That the waitresses came with the restaurant?

“Be a good girl now or I'll make sure that you're out of a job.”

I stared at him, anger clutching my throat. “Not if I quit!” And I dropped the tray with the dirty dishes on the table and in the silence that ensued in the dining room, I stormed off.

Nikolai stood by the door dumbfounded, clearly unsure if he should try to stop me or help me out with a kick.

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“By the way,” I said as I walked by him, “you have a bald spot on the back of your head.”

And I slammed the door behind me.