

Do Not Assume

By Kasey Riley

Prologue

The garish lights from the Las Vegas Strip shone through the slit in the room-darkening curtain, which did little to either dim the light in the room or soften the sounds from the Strip. The only sound in the room was the soft voice of the young woman singing to her new daughter, whom she held to her breast. Her loving eyes watched her baby nurse greedily.

“Nicoleta Sofia, va creste înțelept, puternic și frumos. Chiar daca nu pot viziona, veți ști că te iubesc...puteți simți, nu poti nici iubirea mea?” Bianca’s heart wept as she spoke to her baby in her native Romanian dialect. “Nicoleta Sofia, you shall grow up wise, strong, and beautiful. Even though I can’t watch it, you’ll know I love you. You can feel it, can’t you, my love?” The baby responded with a gurgle and waved her hands—the growing bond with her mother exciting her.

Bianca began singing a Romanian lullaby, continuing until her baby’s eyes drifted closed and she no longer suckled. Wrapping her daughter in the last clean blanket in the room, she placed the sleeping child in the middle of the queen-sized bed. Lovingly, she placed pillows on either side. Yesterday, alone in this room, she’d given birth. The labor thankfully, had been short. The premature baby was born small but grew stronger by the hour. Bianca smiled. Perhaps her daughter would be able to heal as fast as her mother, as it was the one ability Bianca didn’t regret.

Turning to the paper on the desk, Bianca wrote down her baby's name. Nicoleta, in honor of her own mother and Sofia, in honor of her grandmother. Deliberately, she left off the surname. If she wanted her child raised without danger from their enemies, she must make sure none knew of Nicoleta's existence. Block letters: NICOLETA SOFIA. She would put the paper in the baby's blanket when she left her.

When she escaped, no one knew of her pregnancy. Bianca would need to place Nicoleta with strangers before the searchers found her. With the last of her money spent, Bianca knew time was limited. Tonight would be her last night to hold her baby. Her stomach grumbled, complaining she had yet to eat today. Searching the room, she found the last remaining slice of stale bread, remnants of yesterday's dinner. Giving in to her hunger, she wolfed it down. Walking painfully into the bathroom, she rinsed out a dirty plastic cup. Draining it twice, she hoped to ease the emptiness in her belly. She prayed it would help to create enough milk to feed Nicoleta.

Picking up her discarded clothing, she stepped into her now-baggy leggings. Their bulk under her tunic tops had hidden her pregnancy well, but now she couldn't keep them up. Panicked, she searched the room, finding only her shoelaces to use as a belt. Her long-sleeved, oversized knitted top hung past her hips to rest against the tops of her thighs. Looking in the mirror, she nodded at the pale woman standing there. Bianca felt her own mother wouldn't recognize her with her light blonde hair blackened, dark circles smudging her thin cheeks, and contacts hiding the blue of her eyes. She prayed those searching for her wouldn't either.

Discarding her now useless, comfortable, tennis shoes, she pulled her four-inch spike-heeled boots from her bag. She hadn't been able to wear them for the past two months. Originally purchased to confuse the searchers, she'd put them away when pregnancy caused her feet to swell.

Sighing, she began stuffing her puffy feet into the tight boots. The zippers rebelled, but her stubborn efforts soon prevailed, and she managed to get them zipped.

The effort cost her. Her ability to heal fast, hampered by her lack of food, didn't help the weakness and exhaustion of childbirth. She couldn't seek medical help; the searchers would find her and Nicoleta. Bianca knew she would gladly die before letting those searching for her, or even Nicoleta's biological father, find her.

She needed to find a safe place to leave her baby. A place where Nicoleta would be discovered and cared for without a search for her mother. She kissed her sleeping baby and headed out to find such a place. She left the "Do not disturb" sign hanging on the door where she'd placed it after her water broke.

Like all casinos, to get outside, she had to pass through the gaming floor. This particular gaming floor had all the games and a full-scale circus and carnival midway. After ten minutes of wandering, trying to find her way out, Bianca stopped a staff member.

"*Unde este o biserică?*" Bianca brought her hands together in the universal shape of prayer.

"Sweetie, I pray too. Every day," the brassy woman laughed. "You want to go to church?" At Bianca's nod, the server took a good look at the girl/woman in front of her.

"Catholic?" she guessed.

"*Catholic, da.*" Bianca smiled and nodded.

Putting down her tray, the server took Bianca's shoulders and turned her toward the closest door. With broad hand signals and raising her voice, she directed, "Out this door, turn right. Guardian Angel Cathedral will be just before Desert Inn Parkway on your left. You'll see Cathedral Drive on the left." With a final wave of her arm to first the right then the left, the server nodded encouragement. "*Hope those boots are comfortable. She's got a long walk ahead of her,*" she muttered to herself as she picked up her tray and continued on to the bar with her orders.

Out in the blinding sun, Bianca dimmed her high powered sight. Before she did, she could see the spire of the cathedral in the distance to the right. Sighing, she headed down the broad four-lane road. Honking cars zoomed past, forcing her to control her oversensitive hearing too. Then she moved as far to the right as she could get. Within a few blocks, her feet hurt, but she could see the cathedral spire getting closer ahead, and her heart soared at the sight.

Her attention on the distant church, she failed to notice a man of medium height following her, drawing closer as fatigue slowed Bianca's steps. With her hearing muffled, she was unable to sense him closing in. Silently, he pulled a switchblade knife, the sounds of traffic covering the click of its opening. With it hidden by his hand, he walked faster to catch her.

Catching movement out of the corner of her eye, Bianca managed to avoid his reaching hand. Reflex and past training had her sidestepping, flinging her leg upward in a powerful, adrenaline-fueled, martial arts kick, she aimed her spiked heel at his throat. She connected with his trachea just below the larynx, crushing both. His arms windmilling, his knife hand came up, slicing her leg from her inner thigh diagonally across both the superficial and deep femoral arteries as he fell.

Feeling her life draining away, Bianca cried for her newborn child. "Nicoleta Sofia, my heart is with you. May God find you a loving home. My life is over, but yours has just begun." Her mumbled Romanian dialect confused the onlookers. Her voice faltered as blackness engulfed her in the bright Las Vegas sun. The gathering crowd of pedestrians could do nothing to save her while the wail of approaching medical help seemed to crawl toward them.

Up in hotel room 474, Nicoleta awoke, screaming at her mother's last breath.

Chapter One

Twenty-Two years later, Sacramento, California

Searching the mass of faces, Nicoleta Sofia Parcels smiled at her adoptive parents as she accepted her college diploma. She waved it merrily at them while she quickly followed her classmates back into the audience. When the final student received his degree and shook the Dean's hand, all hell broke loose in the student body. What had been a sedate, orderly, and quiet crowd became a sea of cheering students and family members. Mortarboards flew into the air, gowns were shed, and students hugged one another in celebration of their success. Soon, they separated from friends to find family and continue the merriment.

"Nicky, Nicoleta, we're over here!"

Not needing her hypersensitive sight, she followed Wayne's booming voice until she reached her two fathers, Wayne and Mike. With a lump in her throat the size of Mt. Hood, she managed gulp back the tears that threatened to fall. Breaking free of the mass of humanity, at last, she raced into their open arms, enjoying the feeling of love and security she always achieved in a "family hug."

"Did you see? I stumbled on the steps going up to the platform. I thought I was going to land on my face and embarrass you. I've never been so nervous in my entire life. Did you get photos? I hope so, I got some selfies in the crowd while the speeches droned on...why do they have to try to bore you to death at these things? God, how I love you both so much!" With the last, she hugged them both again before stepping between them, running an arm through each of theirs. "So, what do you have planned for celebrating this momentous event? You are taking me out to dinner, right?"

Then what? You know I'm old enough to drink now, think we could have some champagne? Why not do dinner at The Winery? They would have champagne for sure."

Turning his head to his husband, Nicoleta's father Mike, asked, "Wayne, do you think she needs champagne? She seems far too bubbly without it at the moment. I think champagne would depress her spirits. What do you think?"

"Well, I don't think it could keep up with her. She's wound so tight, I doubt she could eat a decent meal. Let's go home and talk about it. Love, you'll want to change clothes anyway. Those pants are not exactly within the dress code of the place where our reservations have been made." Wayne turned loose of Nicoleta as they reached the car. He held the car door, first for his husband, Mike, and then for his daughter before walking around to the driver's side.

Nicoleta racked her brain, trying to think of a place her parents would like that would require formal wear. The drive out to the Foothills was quiet while she envisioned all the restaurants they frequented. None were formal. Wayne and Mike just were not into the club scene, and after twelve years in the family, Nicoleta seldom dressed up for a night out with them.

Pulling into the drive, Wayne half turned to Nicoleta in the back. "Now, there's a dress laid out on your bed, and put your hair up for us. We want to see the adult you've become tonight. When you're ready, we'll be down in the living room. There's something we need to tell you. Dinner reservations are for six, so we've got lots of time. Take yourself a nice hot bath and relax."

More puzzled than before, Nicoleta ran up to her room. Opening the door, tears sprung unbidden to her eyes when she saw the sparkly gold and black gown on the bed. Mike must have designed it. He had the best taste. She had no doubts that it would fit and look fantastic. He'd done the same thing for her high school prom. He would draw out the design and choose the fabrics for his old theater friends to create the gown. She was the luckiest girl in the world.

Thanks to Mike, she wore original evening dresses created by a master of design who loved her.

Afraid to pick it up until she was ready to dress for fear her tears would fall on it; she ran to the bathroom. Once she had a bubble bath running, she turned to the mirror, grabbed her long black hair, twisted it into a bun, and secured it on top her head. This would do for her bath. Afterward, she would create something more formal. Maybe she would be able to get a couple of curls along her neck or framing her face. With that thought in mind, she plugged in her curling iron before stripping and climbing into the luxurious scented bubble bath. Relaxing down into the tub until the bubbles tickled her chin, a long drawn out sigh escaped her smiling lips.

The hot water and bubbles worked magic. All the stress of finals, the worry of embarrassing her parents, and the excitement of the day seemed to drift away. A smile played around her lips, flitting into being then disappearing as her brain played over the past week. Classes had been a bitch, waiting for test scores had been tense, then rewarding. Now to find a job in her chosen field. With a 3.9 grade average, she should be able to find something.

Her downfall to a perfect 4.0 had been “History of Creative Writing.” Seriously? Who cared about what was creative back in days gone by? She wanted to be on the cutting edge, not just riding in a sea of mediocre writers.

Passing a mirror, she paused to apply makeup. Walking back to her bed, she looked at the dress. Returning to her makeup table, she reached into the drawer and brought out the gold eyeshadow and sparkly highlighter, black eyeliner, and the mascara. She studied her features, trying to be objective, before applying her cosmetics.

Her eyes were almond-shaped, irises a golden color with flecks of green when she was happy or excited. Tonight, the gold would pick up the color of her dress; maybe she should use the green eyeshadow to bring out the unusual flecks which she could see. No, gold for the dress would be

more dramatic. Her cheekbones were delicate and high, her skin color at this time of year was a golden olive from the sun. In the winter, she would be a creamy color with the olive undertone. She wondered for the millionth time what ancestry would give her this combination of skin color, eye color, straight thick black hair, and face shape. In her teens, she'd spent hours watching beauty pageants and shows on Discovery, Science Channel, and National Geographic. Trying to see all the races of the world and find one that she resembled. She accepted herself, but she just wanted to know something about her origins.

Sighing, she applied her makeup, added the dramatic eyeshadow, a thick black line on her eyelid, and under her eye to accentuate their size and then finished with black mascara on her long lashes. *"Whoa. Maybe I should take some of this stuff off...I'm not certain how adult the guys want me to look, but I'm damn certain they don't want me to look like I was just picked up off the street."* She laughed at the woman in the glass before gently removing the eyeliner from her bottom lid and toning down the eyeshadow. *"Now, at least, we won't get arrested by the Vice Squad."*

Putting away her eyeshadow and mascara, she pulled out her assortment of blush and highlighters to accentuate her cheeks. Tilting her head from one side to the other, she chose a blush of a deeper shade to compliment her skin tone. She layered in the deeper rose, softened it with a powder blush with light sparkles, and then reached for her reddest lip-gloss. She used the red gloss sparingly, but enough to make her lush lips a focal point on her face. Looking at the mirror, she smiled, satisfied with the overall effect.

Walking to the bed, she let her bathrobe fall before lifting the gown and sliding it over her head. She made sure no fabric touched her face. She took a deep breath and managed to zip up the back, thankful for the built-in bra because there was no way any bra she owned wouldn't show with this dress. She dug around in her lingerie drawer to find

the one thing she possessed. She bought it once “just in case” and had yet to wear it. Well, this was the dress to need it.

The style of the dress was a deep V-neck in a broad vertical band of glimmering gold fabric that ran down to the floor in the front and back. The V in the back exposed her smooth olive skin almost to her waist. Either side of the glimmering gold was shiny black satin, soft and clingy to her shape. The right side of the body-shaped long skirt was slit to the middle of her thigh.

What in the hell were her parents thinking? This dress would do justice to an affair like the Academy Awards if worn by the sexy starlet of the season. How had it ended up here on her bed? Did Mike realize how this dress looked? Well, it wouldn't hurt to wear it downstairs, but she wasn't going to wear it to any restaurant in Sacramento, and that was a fact. Testing the stretch and slide of the fabric, she moved around her room before going back in front of the bathroom mirror to pin up her thick black hair.

The woman in the mirror. OMG. Nicoleta knew it couldn't be her, but every time she moved, the image in the mirror did too. Finally, she accepted it was her reflection and spent ten minutes putting her long hair into a bun on the top of her head with a few stray locks on her neck and a couple of hard-won curls framing her face. Nodding lightly to the stranger in the mirror, Nicoleta turned and left the safety of her room to show her parents the final product of the dress, the woman, and the makeup. At the base of the stairs, she found a pair of gold lamé sandals waiting for her. Three-inch heels, straps around her ankle, delicate strap over her toes with a black onyx set over the arch of her foot. Mike never did things halfway. She slipped her foot into the sandals and buckled the strap around her ankle. Now, Nicoleta was ready to appear in the living room. Smiling shyly, she put her shoulders back and straightened her spine as Mike had taught her and walked into the living room.

“OMG. Wayne, I told you, but you wouldn't believe me. Now, you can't deny it any longer. Nicoleta, you are

gorgeous! But sweetie, we have to tell you something. Sit down on that stool over there, you don't want to wrinkle." Mike pointed to one of the tall stools used at the kitchen counter they had dragged into the living room.

"Did Wayne think I was ugly?" Nicoleta asked with a smile after sitting cautiously on the edge of the stool.

"No, little love. Your father knows you're gorgeous, always has. But we've been having an argument for the past eleven years, and now he has to admit I'm right. You look nothing like either of us, we can no longer let you think you're our blood. Honey, as much as we want to claim you...you're adopted." Mike said the last as though imposing a sentence.

"Guys, I was eleven when I arrived at this house. I think I've known for quite a while that you two are not my blood relatives. However, no one will ever convince me you're not the parents of my heart. I love both of you so much, and I know how much you've done for me. I want to say 'Thank you' for everything. You didn't have to accept me—several families didn't—but you took me in and gave me love and the security of belonging to a family. I can never repay you. I love you both so much."

"Seriously, you mean all this time you *knew* you weren't our blood? Damn, what gave it away? My freckles or Mike's coffee-and-cream complexion?" Wayne managed to look shocked.

Nicoleta laughed at their antics. "Okay, now tell me. Where do you think we're going for me to be in this dress? I can't think of any place in town this formal." Nicoleta looked from one man to the other, waiting for them to explain.

"Well, Sweet Cheeks, don't you want to know what we got you for graduation? The dress doesn't count. That's a special outfit for you to go job hunting." Wayne laughed at Nicoleta's expression when he said job hunting.

"What kind of job do you guys think I'm going to apply for? In this getup, it might be on a corner in the red-

light district.” She tried but failed to keep the shock she felt out of her voice.

“Honey, we didn’t mean what you’re thinking. We’re going to a major charity ball up at South Lake Tahoe tonight. Mike managed to get us all on the guest list. We hope, while there, you’ll meet and make a good impression on the right people so when you apply next week, they’ll remember just how well you can fit into their level of society. A publicist to the rich and famous needs to look the part.” Wayne’s expression was fond pride as he looked Nicoleta over from the fancy dress to the elegant shoes.

Relief washed through her. For a few minutes, she’d been seriously worried about how her parents viewed her. No child wanted their parents to think of them as a slut, or even as a woman willing to trade on her sexuality to get a job. “You had me worried. Okay, a charity ball, I can do that. How will I know anyone? Even dressed like this, I can’t just walk up to a VIP and offer my services without them thinking I’m offering something other than media management.”

“Oh, we thought of that too. You remember Melody Menendez? You know, the wife of our godson, the mayor of some Nevada city? She offered to guide us, meaning you, through the crowd. With her connections, she knows everybody who needs to be known. She also knows all the dirt and who to avoid. This is going to be sooo much fun,” Mike gushed. “But before we head out, we still have to give you your graduation present.” He turned to Wayne, and they exchanged a scheming look.

“We know how much you’ve always wanted to know about your past and your origins. For your graduation, we hired a firm to look into the circumstances of your birth and how you ended up as a foster child. Here is their report. I found it very interesting.” Wayne handed a large brown manila envelope to Nicoleta, then continued. “It’s not near enough to give you what you’re looking for. So, we ordered this DNA kit from an online company that promises to

process it for both your Mitochondrial and for the Autosomal DNA. Since you don't have any male relatives, they can't do the Y-chromosome test. The Mitochondrial will give you your heritage along with your mother's line, and the Autosomal will help define the part of the world where your ancestors originated." Wayne looked over at Mike, and then the men both smiled at Nicoleta, proud to have found her the perfect gift.

"How did you know? I've never told either of you that I want to know more about where I came from and how I ended up here in Sacramento. I'd never hurt your feelings by even suggesting the family you've made for me isn't enough." Nicoleta's heart felt nigh to bursting as she looked from one proud man to the other. They'd loved her when no one else would keep her. Her earliest memories were always of being handed back to the social workers with the adult saying, "she just doesn't fit in with our family" as they turned and left her behind.

"Honey, it's only natural. You should want to know. You have beautiful features which don't exactly match your skin color or the color of your eyes. We've always guessed European with a touch of the Middle East, but from the time you understood such things, you've been researching ethnic traits. I'm amazed you didn't follow that research in college." Mike smiled at her, a question hanging in his eyes.

"By the time I got to college, I accepted my looks and coloring as being simply me. Not something I could change by knowing why or where they came from. My only questions were how I ended up in the Foster Care system. You and Wayne accepted me and loved me regardless of my background, and that was enough for me to accept my differences." She stopped there, not going into the extent of her differences. Some things, even Wayne and Mike, didn't know, and she wasn't about to tell them at this juncture. Her overactive senses and psychic abilities had become undeniable as she progressed through puberty. She'd learned to create a mental wall to keep the world out and keep herself

from “feeling” all the emotions floating around wherever she happened to be. The same mental wall would dim her sight and dull her hearing so she could function without extreme sunglasses or earplugs. She also learned to control her urges to “help” those around her feel better or do what she wanted. Controlling the urge to influence others had been her most significant challenge. Every day she had to keep from interfering with situations she knew she could change.

Like the time she got a speeding ticket. She could have used her talent to keep from getting it, but her conscience had prevented her from influencing the officer. She did use her gift once, and that time, she knew it was the right time. A man with a gun, she hadn’t seen it but knew from his stance and the dark aura around him that he had it, wanted to rob the quick mart she and others were buying lunch at. She turned her talent on him, urging him to not rob the place and to go back outside. Then she followed him outside and walked behind him until he reached the river. Under her influence, he’d thrown the gun out in the water before turning for the drug clinic down the road. Once there, she’d made him want to go inside and get clean of the drugs in his system. All that had made her late back to class gave her a horrendous headache too, but she felt good about what she’d done.

“Gee, you guys...” Tears welled in her eyes as she jumped down from the stool and carefully hugged each of them. “I’m not going to mess my makeup by crying—but where did you hide the tissues?” She looked for the closest box only to have Wayne hand her one before he used one to blot the moisture from his own eyes.

“Nicky, we’re so proud of you. You’ve done nothing but make us happy since we took on the challenge of raising an exceptional young girl and watching her become a special young lady.” Wayne hugged her again.

“Wayne, watch out, you’re going to wrinkle the dress.” Mike pulled Wayne back and hugged Nicoleta carefully, holding her by the shoulders and kissing each

cheek lightly. “Congratulations, Sweetie. Now, let’s get going, it’s after five.”

