



TIDY

Past Due
Free Read

USA Today Bestselling Author

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(A Past Due Free Read)

By Roxie Rivera

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As soon as I stepped into Fielding's, the delicious smells of their brunch offerings hit me. Besian had convinced me to ignore my early morning gym alarm for a different sort of workout, and frankly, I hadn't been able to think of a single reason to say no. But I had skipped breakfast to get to my Pilates class on time, and my stomach was growling with hunger now.

"Marley!" Andres got my attention with a quick wave.

"Andres!" I shifted my handbag to my shoulder and hugged him tightly. It was a bit awkward with his crutches in the way, but we managed it. "Oh my gosh! It's so good to see you!"

"And you!" His gaze swept from my head to my toes and back again. "Marriage looks good on you."

"Thank you." I smiled. "We're very happy."

"I'm glad." He motioned toward my hand. "That looks better."

"Perfectly healed." I held up the hand I had injured during our rescue of Stefana. "Aston gave me some crazy scar cream potion filled with all kinds of things I can't even pronounce."

"I may have to get some of that for my surgery scars." He shifted his weight on his crutches. "I felt terrible about the way we ended things back in Tirana."

"Don't! It was a mess, Andres. For both of us." I gestured to his leg. "You worse than me."

The hostess interrupted us with an apologetic smile and offered to seat us at our reserved table. Andres gestured for me to go first and followed close behind, his crutches barely audible over the music and chatter of the restaurant. We took our seats, and he settled his crutches against the wall and out of the way.

"So, how is the recovery going?" I asked as we looked over the brunch menu.

"Good. I'm in PT a few days a week. The brace will come off soon. I should be cleared for most physical activity by Christmas."

I shot him a look. "I hope that doesn't mean you're planning to go skiing for the holidays!"

He laughed. "My mother would throw a fit. She wanted to follow me back here and move in so she could take care of me."

"That might not have been so terrible," I remarked, trying to keep my voice steady. My mother had been gone for almost a month now. Even though she was only a phone call away, I still missed her terribly. There were so many things I wanted to ask her, so many questions that plagued me day and night, but it never seemed like the right time to bring those things up on our short phone calls.

“No,” he agreed. “Being home with my family after my surgery gave me a lot to think about, you know? More and more, I find myself wondering if it isn’t time to look for a transfer back to Europe.”

Our waiter approached and took our drink orders, Topo Chico for both of us and a cocktail for me. We both knew what we wanted from the menu and ordered our food.

“Does that fit your early retirement plan?” I wondered aloud after the waiter left. “You mentioned wanting to get out of the game before you hit forty.”

“It might, if I can find the right position. Maybe a promotion,” he added. “Or switching sectors.”

“To finance?” I asked coyly, knowing full well he was talking to Stefana almost daily.

His face flushed. “Well, that might be one of the sectors I would consider.”

“Uh-huh,” I murmured, glancing up and smiling as the waiter brought our drinks. I sipped my cranberry and vodka cocktail. It was extremely tasty, and I decided I would have to drag Besian here sometime soon.

“She’s wonderful,” Andres remarked and drew his finger along the rim of his Topo Chico bottle. “She came to see me in Barcelona.”

“I know.”

He cleared his throat, and his face flushed a darker shade. “Hopefully, you don’t know everything,” he said with a nervous laugh.

“No,” I assured him. “Not everything.”

Granted, Stefana had given me some hints about how her short visit had gone, but I hadn’t pressed for any of the details. Judging by the red tint to the tips of Andre’s ears, the details were very, very smutty.

“So,” he said, changing the subject, “tell me about your new life as Mrs. Strip Club Boss.”

I snorted indelicately and rolled my eyes. “Well,” I said with an exaggerated sigh, “the free pole dancing lessons are quite an enjoyable perk.”

Taken aback, Andres asked, “Are you joking or are you serious?”

“Joking.” I laughed. “Besian would have a stroke if he found me swinging from a pole at Peaches.”

“Understandably,” Andres replied. “But you’re happy? You’re settling into married life, okay?”

“Yes. I mean, there are moments of friction, but generally, it’s great.”

“Friction, huh?”

I shrugged. “I’ve never lived with a partner before, and he hasn’t either. It’s an adjustment, you know? Sharing a living space. Figuring out boundaries. Dividing up the household chores. Things like that.”

He made a face. "I can't imagine your husband vacuuming or washing dishes."

"Strangely enough, he's actually very tidy and efficient when it comes to housekeeping."

We chatted easily for the next hour, enjoying our meal and each other's company. When the bill came, I snatched it away before Andres could grab it and ignored his protests as I handed over my card. "Besian's treat," I insisted.

"He already apologized," Andres replied with a wave of his hand. "And his friend, Zec, went above and beyond to make sure I was sent home safely and comfortably." He retrieved his wallet and pulled out some cash. "At least let me cover the tip."

"If you want."

"I want." He placed some cash on the table, and I tucked it into the black folio holding the receipt and my card. After the bill was settled, we left the restaurant. I waited with him until his Lyft arrived and invited him to dinner at our place. Once I was sure he was safely in the Tahoe that had come to ferry him home, I headed for my Prius and got behind the wheel. I texted Besian to let him know I was headed to my mother's house and left the parking lot.

The drive to the trailer park was surprisingly nice. I didn't get cut off even once and not a single person shot me the finger or honked. Considering how wild some of my fellow Houstonian drivers were, that was practically a miracle.

Feeling a bit wistful, I drove by my now empty house. Kostya had handled the gruesome task of cleaning the place and removing all of my belongings. I couldn't bear the thought of ever touching anything that had been in the kitchen so he had gotten rid of it all. Other than my clothes, books, plants and some personal items that meant the most to me, I had donated everything else.

I wasn't sure what to do with the house now. The thought of renting it out to anyone, even after a full kitchen reno, made me feel gross. Could I really ask someone to pay me money to eat in the same room where a woman had been killed? Where she had been left to rot? My stomach churned just thinking about it!

When I finally made it to my mother's double-wide, I parked under the carport and sat for a moment. I hadn't made much headway inside the house. Even after a solid week of coming to the house every single day to sort and purge the piles and stacks her hoard, I had only made it from the front door to the living room, the kitchen and laundry room. Most of the things she had collected were still in the boxes they were shipped in or the bags from the stores where she had bought them. Seeing the evidence of all the money she had spent over the years was staggering. I had tried to add it all up, but after the first two days, I was so emotionally exhausted and upset I had to stop.

My phone chirped, and I dug it out of my purse. I glanced at the screen and noticed the message from Nicole. When I swiped it open, I was greeted by glossy images of a home she wanted us to consider. It wasn't scheduled to hit the market until after the weekend, but she had been given first dibs at offering it to her clients. I scrolled through the photos and loved almost every single one.

But even though the house ticked all of my boxes, it missed all of Besian's. It was too small, too old and needed some serious remodeling in the bathrooms. With a sigh, I sent her an email thanking her

for sending along the listing but declining a showing. Nicole answered quickly, assuring me it was fine, and she promised to keep searching.

Knowing I couldn't procrastinate a moment longer, I got out of my car and went into the house. At least, after a week of cleaning and organizing, it smelled much better. The mustiness was gone, and the air purifiers I had purchased were keeping the dust and other grimy bits trapped in their filters. I didn't dare light a candle with all of the highly flammable stuff packed in the house so I made do with some fragrance diffusers.

I dropped my purse on the clean and completely uncovered couch before making my way to the bedroom that had once been mine. It had long been turned into yet another storage space, packed from floor to ceiling with all the treasures my mother had bought but never used. I picked a stack on the right and started opening the boxes to see what was inside each one.

Handbags. So. Many. Handbags.

Dooney & Burke. Frye. Vera Bradley. Tory Burch. Rebecca Minkoff. Coach.

Crossbody. Hobo. Tote. Satchel.

Dozens and dozens of them. Never used. The tags still dangling from the straps. Paper stuffed inside to hold the shape.

The thought of photographing, listing, selling, packing and shipping each handbag overwhelmed me. I sank down on the dirty carpet I had uncovered, surrounded by piles of purses, and tried to make sense of my mother's addictions to shopping and gambling. For me, the idea of spending so frivolously, of just wasting money on things I would never use, was unacceptable. To her, it was a compulsion she couldn't deny.

After learning about the ways she had been mistreated by the MC while Spider was in the pen, it made sense, I guess. These things, these piles of boxes, were insulation from the outside world. They were a tangible wall of protection against the men who had hurt and abused her.

In another way, they were a serious fuck-you to Spider. She had taken his money, money that he had done terrible, dangerous things to earn, and wasted it on things she would never use. It must have burned him right up to see it.

I still hadn't quite come to terms with the fact that the man I had known since my days as a toddler, the man I had believed was my stepfather, was actually my uncle. I cringed when I thought about my uncle/daddy situation. It was the most stereotypical white trash, trailer park thing. I was literally a walking meme.

The squeal of the front door opening put me instantly on alert. I reached for my purse and the handgun safely tucked inside—and realized I had left it on the couch. *Shit.*

"Marley? Baby?" Besian called out from the living room.

Relieved, I shouted back, "I'm back here!"

He appeared in the doorway of my childhood bedroom with my purse dangling from his fingertips. His brows were knitted in annoyance. "The SIG we bought for you to defend yourself isn't much use if it's another room, *rrushe*."

I winced. "Yeah. Sorry."

Shaking his head, he carried the purse into the room and set it on top of a low stack of boxes. He glanced around the room and sighed. "Are you sure you want to keep doing this? There are companies that clean out houses like this." He ran his fingers over a dusty box and rubbed them together, his face scrunching up with distaste. "I worry about you breathing in all this filth."

"You worry too much," I protested weakly, even though deep down inside I loved that he always thought of me and my safety.

"One of us has to," he muttered as he crossed the path I had cleared. He crouched down in front of me and placed his hand on my cheek. He leaned in for a kiss, and I met him halfway. "I missed you."

I laughed. "I haven't even been gone four hours!"

"Four hours too long." He kissed my cheek and then my jaw. "Four hours we could have been spending in bed doing much more interesting things."

His smoldering gaze pinned me in place, and I bit my lower lip. "We can still do those interesting things later."

"As if that was even up for discussion." He kissed me again, this time making sure I understood exactly what awaited me once we returned home.

I was still trembling inside, my belly streaked with heat and excitement, when he rose to his full height and lifted the flaps on a nearby box. He peeked inside and scowled. "How many fucking purses does one woman need?"

"You'd have to ask Aston and Rina."

He snorted with amusement. "Knowing those two, the answer would be somewhere north of 100 but less than 1000."

Mentioning Rina reminded me of an email I had had earlier that morning. "I heard back from Gilda."

"The grad student that Vivian put you in contact with?" He moved the box he had opened to the stack of handbag boxes and scribbled the designer's name on it with a black marker.

"Yes." I handed him the box I had just labeled to add to the stack. "So, she isn't sure they can get Rina into the visual arts program, but they could get her into a similar program. Maybe art history or architecture or even something like classical studies or a language or history major. Once she's enrolled, she can either add visual arts as a minor, or she can apply to change her major which is an easier process."

"Have you told Rina yet?"

I shook my head. "I got the email right before Pilates."

"I'm sure she'll be thrilled when you do."

"And Luka?" I asked, a bit nervous that her brother's newfound leniency wouldn't extend to his sister flying across the Atlantic to attend college.

"He'll have to get over it," he said with a shrug. "Rina has made it clear that she's coming to the US whether he likes it or not. It's easier for him to accept it and support her than risk her not coming back."

I worried she wouldn't want to go back regardless of Luka's support but decided not to even bring that up. That was a Rina and Luka problem, not a Besian and Marley and Luka and Rina problem.

Besian approached another pile of boxes and read the shipping label. He picked up the box and looked at the one under it. "Jesus Christ, Marley! How much money did Kim spend at QVC?"

"I stopped adding it up," I grumbled.

He glanced around the room and seemed to be doing a bit of hasty mental math. "Marley, have you found any bank statements? Credit cards? Loan documents?"

"No. Most of the mail in the living room was magazines or Fingerhut catalogs. I didn't see any bills or bank statements."

"That didn't strike you as strange?"

"I figured she chose paperless statements," I said with a shrug. "Why does it matter?"

"Your mother used your photos to catfish men, Marley. She stole money from your bank accounts," he said carefully. "How do we know that she didn't open credit cards or take out loans in your name to pay for all this shit?"

My stomach swooped painfully. I clenched my hands around the Frye tote I had just uncovered. "She wouldn't." I swallowed hard. "Right?"

He didn't answer that question. Instead, he grimly gestured toward the hallway. "I'm going to dig through the other rooms and look for unopened or hidden mail."

Sickened by the prospect of my mother ruining my credit, I sat there, numb and distraught. My love for my mother warred with the pain of yet another possible betrayal. It was so easy to make excuses for her behavior, but at some point, I was going to have to accept that these were choices she was making, choices that hurt me emotionally and financially.

I could hear Aston in my head, urging me to limit contact with my mother. I couldn't do that. I couldn't cut her off. As twisted and dysfunctional as our family was, she was my mother, and I loved her.

But, someday soon, I hoped to start a family with Besian. I couldn't constantly be torn between my mother and my children and my husband. My family with Besian would always come first, would be my number one priority, and I had to make sure my mother understood that.

Dreading that future conversation, I got up off the floor and poked around in the other boxes. I found loads of unopened makeup in a few of them. *Expensive* makeup. I shifted through the contents of a heavy box and uncovered fourteen Natasha Denona palettes. The next box held a selection of Pat McGrath and Viséart collections. The box under that was packed with products from Huda Beauty. Thousands and thousands of dollars of unopened, sealed designer makeup just taking up space and being wasted.

What the hell am I going to do with all of this stuff?

I wasn't even sure how to go about selling makeup. Should I throw it up online? Offer it on Facebook? Sell it to someone else as a lot and let them handle it?

"Marley! Come here!"

Besian's voice pulled me out of my troubled thoughts. "Where are you?"

"In your mother's room."

When I found him, he was sitting on the edge of the bed. Piles of clothes with the tags dangling from them surrounded him, and I shifted a stack of dark wash jeans that still smelled of dye to the floor so I could sit next to him. He held a couple of oversized envelopes and folders, all of them stuffed with paperwork. "What did you find?"

"Legal documents."

"From where?"

"There." He gestured to an open safe across the room, stashed behind a treadmill covered in shoe boxes and stacks of paper towels and toilet paper.

"Was it open like that when you found it?"

"No." He thumbed through the documents on his lap. "But I figured I should try your birthday before I called Devil to come crack it open for us." He smiled at me. "It worked."

I rolled my eyes. "Good lord, what is the point of having a safe if you're going to make it that easy to unlock?"

"She probably knew you would have to come open it someday," he reasoned and handed me a stack of paperwork.

"Maybe," I said uncertainly and took the papers from him. "What is this?"

"It seems as though Spider left everything to you."

My heart skipped a beat. "What?"

"Yeah, it's all here. Some of it is in a trust. Some of it is set up in different corporations and business structures."

"I don't understand." I tried to make sense of the paperwork in front of me. There were places with my signature that I never remembered signing. "I didn't sign these."

“Well, let’s keep that to ourselves,” he suggested with a meaningful look. “If he forged your signature, he did it for a good reason.”

“But if my mother forged it and used my information?” I asked, thinking of how quickly he had assumed the very worst of her just a few minutes ago.

“That’s different,” he argued. “Spider left you real estate and assets. Your mother left you debt and a dead body.”

I frowned at him. “That’s unkind.”

“But the truth,” he insisted. Gesturing to the papers in my hand, he said, “We need to see our lawyer in the morning. We need to see how Spider’s arrest impacts these documents. We need to make sure that we understand the tax liabilities and other complications that might arise from all of this.”

“Won’t the government try to take it away if Spider is found guilty?”

“They’ll try.” Besian sighed and handed me the rest of the envelopes and folders. “We’ll fight them.”

“Not if it costs us too much money,” I disagreed, watching him stand and return to the safe. “I don’t want us wasting your hard-earned money.”

“Marley,” he glanced back at me, “you’re holding millions of dollars of assets in your hands right now. We’re fighting for you to keep every penny that you’re entitled to,” he promised. “That’s yours. I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you keep it.”

As he crouched down in front of the safe and started retrieving more items from it, I looked through the envelopes and folders. Besian was right. It was millions of dollars in assets I held. There were the trailer parks and quite a few of the mobile homes within them. There was the bar down on the coast, a couple of laundromats, and a few barebones RV parks near oil and gas drilling sites peppered across the state. There were six bikes in my name and a Suburban. Everything was paid off and owned outright.

“Look at these,” Besian said, returning to the bed as I glanced through tax returns filed for the last six years. I didn’t even want to think about how illegal it was for him to file business taxes with my name on them. My inability to get certain graduate loans finally made sense. I was lucky I hadn’t gotten in trouble for filing fraudulent FAFSA forms! “Keys for safe deposit boxes at CNB.”

“I’m almost afraid to find out what’s in those.” I warily eyed the keys.

“Who knows? Maybe he’s got some of missing Picassos and Matisse paintings squirreled away in there,” he teased.

I chortled. “You’re joking, but as crazy as my family is, I wouldn’t be surprised to find out that Spider somehow got his hand on Nazi plunder that’s been missing for seventy years.”

Besian placed the keys back into an envelope and set it aside. He opened one of the other thick envelopes he had carried back with him. He reached in and froze. His eyes widened, and I asked, “What?”

Carefully, he pulled out whatever was in the envelope and held it up for us both to see. My jaw dropped. It was a quart-sized Ziplock jammed full of diamonds. "Is that...? Are those...?"

"Diamonds," he confirmed, tilting his head as he examined the bag.

I grimaced. "I don't want those. They're probably blood diamonds."

"Probably," he agreed. "We can sell them easily. I know a guy." He glanced at me. "Unless you want to offer them to Abby first?"

"No! I don't want Abby anywhere near this illegal shit!"

"Fair enough." He slipped the bag back into the envelope.

"Is that common?" I wondered, gesturing toward the diamonds. "To keep diamonds like that?"

He nodded. "We have some in the safe in my office. I keep gold jewelry, too. Some silver. You never know when we might need to barter or trade."

We. Us. Together. As partners.

"What happens after...?" I stopped and decided to rephrase my question. "How do we make the money from the sale of the diamonds legitimate?"

He gave me a look. "Crypto."

My mouth settled into a grim line. "You can't be serious. Not after everything we just went through!"

"There are other ways," he allowed, "but they're more complicated. Laundering money isn't easy anymore, not in big amounts at least."

I sighed. "Well, what if we only sell a few diamonds at a time? Is that easier to launder?"

Besian's brow furrowed. "I don't think I like talking about this with you. It feels wrong."

"But it's okay for you to take on the burden? For you to handle it all on your own?"

"Baby, I'm already a criminal, but you? You're still good. Clean. Innocent."

"B, there's nothing innocent about me anymore." I leaned in and brushed my lips against his. "Especially not after the wicked, dirty things you've taught me."

He laughed darkly and kissed me back. It was a possessive, hungry kiss that reminded me of just how passionate he could be. Besian slipped his arm around my waist as I opened another envelope. I withdrew the contents and went still when I realized what I was holding.

It was a photograph of me as a baby with my mom, my biological mother, Annie.

Besian's hand settled on my waist, and he gave me a loving squeeze. "Your mother was beautiful."

"She was," I whispered and lovingly touched her face. She looked impossibly young in the photo, still just a teenager. Even though she smiled as she stood beneath a weeping willow, holding me close

and nuzzling my cheek, there was such sadness in her eyes. She looked haunted, and it broke my heart knowing all that she had endured to give me life.

There were more photographs behind that one, lots of candid shots of Annie holding or playing with me. She smiled in all of them, but those smiles never quite reached her eyes. She was wearing a mask of happiness that she would, eventually, find unbearable.

Under all of the photographs, I found my original birth certificate. My breath caught in my throat at the sight of my biological father's name. Even though he had committed such a violent outrage against her, Annie had included him in the official paper trail. But why? Why would she claim him as the father of her child?

"She must have known even then that she wasn't going to be alive much longer," Besian remarked sadly and took the birth certificate from me.

"Why do you say that?" I asked quietly.

"She put his name here because she wanted you to know who he was."

"I wish I didn't." I couldn't even bear to think about the genes I had inherited from that monster.

"Marley, you're not the only one with terrible secrets in her family tree," he said gently. "You are a good person. That's all that matters."

I knew he was right, but it was hard to swallow all the same. He drew me in against him and brushed his lips across the top of my head. "I love you, Marley. No matter what."

I closed my eyes and leaned into him, drawing strength from his love. "I love you, too."

"Let's go home," he suggested softly. "We'll empty out the safe and look through the rest of this later."

His suggestion seemed like the best idea I had heard all day. I found a laundry basket and dumped the clothing it held onto my mother's bed. We piled everything from the safe into the basket, and he carried it out to his car. After he shut the passenger door, he prowled toward me, and I couldn't help but smile as he backed me up against my car. He gazed down at me in that way that made my heart flutter and my body ache for him.

"I'll follow you home," he said and leaned down to nuzzle me. "We'll take a bath, have some wine and then..." He kissed a slow, ticklish trail down the side of my neck. "Well. I don't want to ruin the surprise."

"I do like surprises," I murmured, smiling up at him.

"I promise this one will be worth the wait."

They always were.

The End.