

A NOVEL

DANGEROUS  
*Beauty*

MELISSA KOSLIN



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a division of Baker Publishing Group  
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Melissa Koslin, *Dangerous Beauty*  
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For Ethan and Elliana.  
We wish we could have known you.

For Elizabeth.  
We can't wait to welcome you into the world.

# Chapter ONE

She ran.

She'd finally orchestrated an opportunity, and she'd run.

Twigs snapped under her bare feet. She hardly felt the pain. It was the sound that rattled through her. *They'll hear. They'll find me.*

She ran faster.

Branches reached out and scraped her skin.

She slipped on some wet leaves but managed to stay on her feet.

She couldn't breathe, but she kept going.

To her left, she could hear cars. It didn't sound like a free-way, but maybe a rural highway. *Should I try to hitchhike?* But the thought of getting into a car with another stranger was too much. She needed to get as far away as quickly as she could, but she wasn't getting into a car with anyone. Logically, she knew the likelihood of finding someone as bad as those she was running from was remote, but logic wasn't forefront for her. Right now was flight mode. Survival.

Darkness started to close around her like a cage.

*Go deeper into the woods and stay there tonight?* She thought about rest, that she needed to stop and sleep at some point, but she couldn't get her legs to stop running. She'd run miles already.

She'd probably collapse before finding enough control to get herself to stop.

Lights in the distance.

Flight mode subsided slightly. Her survival instincts screamed at her to stay away from people, but she knew she couldn't stay out here in the woods the rest of her life, however long that ended up being. If she were back home, she'd have a fighting chance, but she didn't know this area, what kinds of animals were native, which plants were edible. As she slowed her pace, she realized how cold it was.

She approached the edge of the woods and peered around a tree to the source of the lights—a truck stop. There were so many gas pumps she couldn't count them. There were big semi-trucks with their rumbling engines that made her nerves feel like lit matches. They sounded just like the truck she'd been thrown into back home, the one that had taken her over the border to this country. That was actually better than what she'd been living through the last several days. On the truck, there had been many women. They'd had one another for warmth, for comfort.

She hid behind the tree. Since when had that nightmare on the truck morphed into a positive memory? They'd lost a few of the women—a couple of them just didn't wake up, and one had suffered a heart attack, she was fairly certain. But she was almost thankful they'd been taken early. It was a better fate.

The chill seeped into her bones, and she wrapped her arms around herself.

She looked over at the truck stop—warmth, a restroom where she could wash. She dearly wished she had some money. She hadn't eaten in two days. And she couldn't steal; her parents had raised her to be honorable, even when it was difficult, especially when it was difficult. But maybe she could find some food in a garbage can.

Carefully, she analyzed the area, identified all entrances and

exits, watched the people. They looked so different here. But they didn't appear to be particularly threatening.

She stood straight, took a breath, and pulled her fingers through her long, black hair. Hopefully her appearance didn't draw too much attention. As she walked across the grass, she tried to wipe the dirt off her feet. All while watching every person, every vehicle.

She moved quickly across the asphalt and into the store. It was huge. There were cases and cases of cold drinks, shelves of food, even two different fast-food restaurants. She made herself ignore the bottles of water so close and headed straight for the ladies' restroom. Mercifully, it was empty. She turned on a faucet, washed her hands, and drank. She filled her cupped hands over and over. Then she washed her face, her hands, her arms. She glanced at the door and decided to risk washing her lower half as well. She lifted her dress and rapidly washed. Maybe she could blend in, disappear, if she was clean enough. She was drying off her feet with rough paper towels when the door opened. She watched the middle-aged woman peripherally but didn't make eye contact.

The woman said something. She thought maybe the woman was asking if she was okay, but with the woman's American accent and how flustered she felt, she wasn't sure. When she looked up, the woman was staring at her, at the bruises on her arms and legs.

She stood, walked into a stall, and locked it.

The woman paused but then used the restroom, washed her hands, and left.

She stood there in the stall and stared at a sticker on the back of the door, written in both English and Spanish. "Human trafficking. Do you need help?"



Meric parked and got out of his car. He glanced down at the other entrance before walking inside the store. As he passed the

counter, he overheard a middle-aged woman telling the cashier, “I asked her if she was okay, but she just locked herself in a stall. She looked pretty battered.”

Meric turned and headed for the hall that led to the restrooms. He stopped outside the ladies’ room.



She waited long enough that the woman should be done in the store and back in her car, walked out of the stall, ignoring her image in the mirror, and headed for the door.

She peeked into the hall before slipping out the door.

A strong hand grabbed her arm.

Rage roared through her. She yanked at her arm, but before she could hit the man or scream, he demanded, “Be quiet.” It took her a second to realize he’d said it in Spanish, not English. Though he had dark hair and eyes, his skin was too fair—she didn’t think he was Mexican, even though his accent was perfect. He lowered his voice, not calming, just quiet. “They’re outside.”

“Who are you? Let me go.” She was sure he wasn’t with the men who’d been holding her. He was fairly young like them, probably thirties, but far too well-dressed and polished in his black suit.

She struggled to free her arm.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said. “They have both entrances covered. You need to call the police.”

“I can take care of myself. Let me go.”

“This country is different. The police will help.”

“No, they won’t.” She yanked at her arm again, but he was so strong, and she was weak from lack of food, almost no sleep, and all the running.

He held both of her arms and shifted closer. “Stop and think. I know what you’ve been through, but you need to slow down and think. You have to accept help.”

She stopped struggling but glared up at him. He was tall with



broad shoulders and strong hands, but she refused to feel intimidated. “You have no idea what I’ve been through.”

“They kidnapped you—out of Mexico, based on your accent. They’ve abused you and plan to sell you. Am I getting it right?”

“How do you know that? Who are you?”

“Someone who pays attention and who happened to stop for a bottle of water at exactly the right time and place,” he said. “If you don’t call the police, I will. But you’re going to have to tell them your story.”

For some reason, tears pricked the backs of her eyes. She hadn’t cried at all since they’d taken her—cursed and screamed and fought, but not cried. Why did the tears want to come now?

As he looked at her, his expression changed—something in his eyes. There was a coldness to him that covered him like a sheet of ice, but in his eyes, there was something else. Fury, but also pain.

“Stay here,” he said.

Then he walked away. He told the cashier something as he walked by. One of the words sounded like *policia*. He spoke too quickly for her to catch any other words. Was he telling the cashier to call the police?

She shifted to the end of the hall and watched him through the window.

He grabbed a man standing by the door, slammed him up against the glass, face toward her, and looked at her. She realized he was waiting for her to confirm it was one of the men who’d been keeping her prisoner. It was the shorter one with receding blond hair, though he was only maybe late twenties. He called himself Carl.

As she looked at Carl, rage flamed up in her chest.

The polished man seemed to understand her expression. He turned Carl around, even as Carl struggled, and punched him square in the face. Blood splattered against the window, and Carl crumpled to the ground.

Then he burst with speed she wouldn’t have guessed a man in

such fine clothes capable of and caught another man, who'd been running away from the other entrance to the store. He caught him halfway across the parking lot, put him in a headlock from behind, and dragged him back to the window.

She walked out from the hall to get a better look. She recognized Josh's face, the face that tormented her nightmares. She made eye contact with the polished man and nodded.

He released the headlock, threw Josh against the glass, and punched him just as hard as he had Carl. Josh slumped to the ground.

The man walked back inside. "Is that all of them?"

She barely got the word out. "Yes."

He turned to the cashier and said something. She heard the word that sounded like *policia* again.

The cashier stammered a response.

The man grumbled "useless" under his breath in Spanish. Then he took a cell phone out of his inside jacket pocket and dialed three numbers.

As she stood there, she realized the entire store had stopped and was staring at both her and the man who'd just knocked out two young, able-bodied men.

He had a short conversation on the phone, hung up, and went back outside to stand over his victims.

She was too shocked to move. Was she really free?

She couldn't stand to be stared at any longer and went outside.

"You shouldn't leave," the polished man said.

There were just as many people staring out here, but it didn't feel so bad. Maybe because there was one person here who understood her language. "I don't know . . ."

"I understand you don't know what to think yet. That's a reasonable reaction. But you need to stay here and tell the police what happened."

She realized she'd placed herself with him blocking her view of Josh. Just the thought of looking at him made her want to run.

“If you don’t tell the police, they’ll be released and will be free to do the same thing to someone else.”

A thought struck her. “And they’ll arrest you for assaulting them.”

“Probably.” He didn’t seem terribly concerned about that.

But she was. “I’m staying.”

“That’s brave of you.” He said it matter-of-factly, as if not intending to give a compliment, simply stating a truth. He glanced over at Carl, who was still unconscious like Josh.

“Who are you?” she asked. “What’s your name?”

“Meric.”

A couple of women standing by a parked car whispered to each other.

He glanced at the women and back to her. “May I ask your name?”

She hesitated. “Liliana.”

He looked down at Josh and then back to her. There was that something in his eyes again. “Thank you for letting me help you.”

“You didn’t exactly get permission.”

She thought the corner of his mouth twitched just slightly.

The sound of sirens made her jump. A few seconds later, two police cars pulled into the lot.

“I’ll stay,” Meric said. “You won’t be alone.”

She’d almost forgotten what it felt like to feel comforted. Everything was suddenly alien.

Meric motioned to the police officers, and they both walked over to him. One of them asked something. She tried to remember the English her mother had taught her. She’d thought her English was decent, but she’d only ever spoken it with her mother, who’d had a distinctly Mexican accent—the American accent was difficult to understand. And being dropped into a foreign country under these circumstances made it harder to focus on a different language.

“Español?” Meric asked.

They both nodded.

"I'm Meric Toledan"—both the officers' expressions flickered with recognition—"and this is Liliana. She was being trafficked by these two men." Meric nodded toward Josh and Carl.

"Is that correct, miss?" one officer asked with a heavy American English accent.

The other officer checked on Josh and then walked over to Carl, surely making certain they were just knocked out.

"Yes, sir." She glanced at Meric then back to the officer. "The cartel took me from my home in Mexico and brought me and about twenty other women across the border in a truck. Then these two men paid them and took me. They said something about a buyer. I think they're middlemen."

"Do you know where the other women are?"

Her shoulders slumped. "No, sir. I've been with these two men for several days. I have no idea where the other women were taken. I don't know why they separated me."

The other officer, after talking into his radio, came back over.

"Because you brought a higher price," Meric said.

Her brows twitched together in confusion.

"Exceptional beauty brings a higher price."

"And how are you involved, Mr. Toledan?" one of the officers asked. The way the officer addressed him sounded like he knew who Meric was, and did she catch a hint of suspicion?

She spoke up. "He saved me. He saw what was happening, and he saved me."

The officer addressed Meric. "How did you know what was happening? Do you know these men? Are you involved?"

Liliana's voice hardened. "He's not involved with them. He risked his own safety to help me."

"Thank you, miss," the officer said and then turned back to Meric. "How did you know what was happening?"

Meric's tone and manner was unemotional. "I overheard a woman telling the cashier about a young lady in the restroom

looking scared and battered. I'd already noticed the men standing at both entrances. I waited for Liliana to come out and confirm my suspicions."

The clerk had come outside. She apparently spoke Spanish. "That's right, Officer. This man parked and came inside well after the other two men arrived. He didn't interact with them, not until after he'd spoken to her." She indicated Liliana. "I can pull the security camera footage for you."

"Please do. Thank you." The officer seemed mostly appeased.

The officers asked Liliana several more questions. Inside, she was upset. Now that she didn't need her rage to fuel her and help her survive, she was on the verge of breaking down. While they questioned her, two more officers arrived and an ambulance. The EMTs checked on Josh and Carl, while the officers watched over them.

She answered another question, and her voice shook.

Meric shifted closer and murmured, "You're safe now."

She nodded once, barely a movement.

He hesitated, and then he turned to the officers. "What's going to happen to her? Where will she go?"

"She's undocumented, so we'll have to call ICE. She'll likely be kept here while the courts work out what happens with these two." He indicated Josh and Carl, who were now being loaded onto gurneys. "After that, I assume she'll go back home."

"I can't go back." It popped out of her mouth before she could stop it.

"You don't want to go back to Mexico?" Meric asked.

"I can't . . . My parents and my sister are gone. If I go back, they'll just take me again." She kept looking at Meric, and more of her story spilled from her lips. "They tried to take me once before, but my father fought them off. The next time, they came prepared." She had no idea why she'd been targeted, but she'd seen far too much—there was no way the cartel would let her live.

"They killed your family," Meric said.

She nodded. And finally, a tear escaped and fell down her cheek. Meric turned to the officers. "She needs asylum."

"She can certainly request it." Then he added in an apologetic tone, "But asylum is usually for those who fear persecution from their government, typically due to race, religion, or political opinion or activism. In this case, the government of Mexico isn't trying to harm her. They should technically be the ones to protect her." The officer turned to Liliana. "I'm very sorry."

Meric looked at Liliana. She felt like his gaze was boring into her. Men had always looked at her, but with him, it felt different. She should be scared of him—he was cold and distant, and she had the impression he was used to being in command. But she wasn't scared of him. Maybe she wasn't thinking clearly. Maybe she was too overwhelmed.

Meric asked the officers, "May I speak to her for a moment?"

"We need to question the witnesses. Stay here." The officers headed in different directions and began taking statements from people in the parking lot and inside the store.

Meric took off his suit jacket and wrapped it around Liliana's shoulders. "You must be cold."

The jacket held his warmth, and the scent was slightly musky—not cologne, maybe just the scent of his soap mixed with his body chemistry. The fabric was thick and soft, nicer than she'd ever felt in her life.

"Do you think you can trust me?" he asked her.

She didn't know how to respond to that.

"If you get sent back to Mexico," he said, "do you have any other family? Anyplace you can go that would be safe?"

She felt uncomfortable telling him all this. She had the feeling he was trying to do something to help her even more. He'd done enough. "They're dead." She paused to control her voice. "I don't have any money. They took the little my parents had."

"The cartels are powerful in Mexico. You think they'll still target you."

"I don't know what will happen when I'm not delivered to the buyer." She paused. "I . . . There's a leader near where we lived. He . . . he tried to buy me from my father. When that didn't work . . ."

"They're not going to let you go," he said. "You're valuable, you've angered and embarrassed them, and you've seen too much." He looked at her in that intense way of his. "You can't go back."

"I think I have to."

"Applying for an employment green card won't work. I've sponsored several employees, and I don't think I can get any more pushed through at the moment." He paused. "There's a way I can keep you here. But you'd have to trust me."

She waited.

"You'd have to marry me."