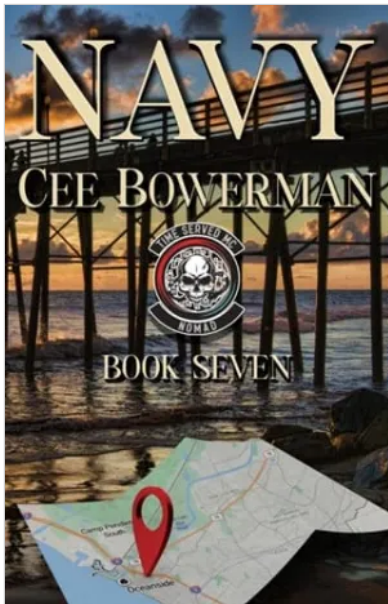




Navy (Time Served MC Nomads #7)

Author: Cee Bowerman

Category: Romance

Description: "When something better comes along, you shouldn't let it pass you by, but in this case, when something you've been dreaming about appears in front of you, take her by the hand and invite her to move into your life."

Sand, sea, and sunshine are important in Navy's life. After years in prison, far from his precious beach, he goes home as soon as he can. Surrounded by family and with his club brothers just a phone call away, Navy's life is great even though there are still plenty of problems around that need to be handled.

Luckily, he has no problem doing that and can't imagine anything getting in the way of those tasks . . .that is, until he finds the woman he's been dreaming about for years sleeping on his roof as if waiting for a kiss from her prince.

After ten years away from home and family, Dalisay finds herself at loose ends. The career she had planned was suddenly ripped from her grasp through no fault of her own, so she made her way home to Oceanside, the place that held such fond memories of her childhood. Reconnecting with her best friend was amazing, but their reunion was shorter than she would have liked due to an extended honeymoon her friend had planned previously. Dali was more than happy to stay in her home while she was gone, but she hadn't planned for that to include falling in love with the man across the hall.

After years of pining away for her best friend's older brother, Dali finally gets the chance to make him see that she's not only all grown up but the perfect woman for him. She has come upon a chance to find out if dreams really do come true.

They navigate the twists and turns of a visit from some of his wild and crazy friends and a crew of men threatening Navy and his family. She knows now that she can make it through anything as long as she and Navy wind up together in the end.

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TWENTY YEARS AGO

N AVY

I heard a commotion outside my bedroom door and sat up in confusion as I grabbed my phone to check the time. As usual, I'd been up way too late - or early, depending on how you looked at it - and had only been asleep for a few hours.

When I heard my mom's raised voice, not in anger but in fear, I jumped out of bed and threw the door open.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I hurried down the hall toward my sister's bedroom, where I'd heard the yelling.

"Your sister's gone," Dad said before he put his hand over his mouth and then ran it down his beard. "She took off sometime last night."

"She was here when I went to bed. I ran into her in the kitchen when I went to get a drink."

"What time was that?" Dad asked.

"Close to six?"

"Are you sure?"

Mom was rifling through the drawers in Corrie's bureau.

“Mom, what are you looking for?” I asked as I watched her frantically pulling things out.

“A diary. A journal. Something that might have a clue about where she went.”

“Did y’all call the cops?” I asked.

“They’re on their way,” Dad assured me.

I saw Corrie’s computer in the corner and knew Mom wasn’t going to find a journal with Corrie’s secrets, but I could find them on her hard drive if I had a few minutes.

“I need this,” I said as I walked across the room and unplugged the tower.

“What are you gonna do with a . . .”

“People don’t write shit down anymore, Mom. They put it online or on their computer.”

Mom’s eyes lit up as she said, “Find her, Anthony!”

“I’ll do my best.”

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I looked at the slip of paper in my hand and double-checked the address that I’d found for the IP of whatever little shit had convinced my sister to run away from home.

I shoved it into my pocket and hopped out of Dad’s truck.

I looked around at the surrounding trailers and knew that no matter what went down, the neighbors wouldn't be much help if I needed it.

On the flipside, they would probably mind their own business if something happened.

I knocked on the door and waited a few seconds before I knocked again. I could hear someone moving around inside, and then I was sure I heard a muffled scream before there was silence.

The door was suddenly yanked open, and a short guy with pasty skin and greasy hair glared at me before he asked, "What do you want?"

"Hi, I'm here from the First Church of the Last Chance here in Oceanside and was wondering if you're interested in saving your soul from eternal damnation."

"What? Get the fuck outta here!" the foul-smelling man said before he tried to slam the door, but I stuck my foot out to stop it and watched him try with all his might to shut it. Over his grunts and groans at the physical exertion he was clearly not used to, I heard a woman's muffled scream.

I reared my arm back and took the guy out in one punch.

I shook off the pain in my hand as I watched him fall backwards.

I made my way into the trailer and slammed the door behind me as I looked around.

It was obvious that the guy cared as much about his surroundings as he did about his appearance.

But I wasn't here for that. I was here for my sister.

“Corrie!” I yelled as I yanked the plug for a nearby box fan out of the outlet. I made quick work of cutting it from the fan and then used it to tightly bind the man’s wrists so I could find my sister. Again, I yelled, “Corrie! Where are you?”

Muffled sobs came from down the hallway to my right, and I rushed toward the sound.

I was terrified of what I might find behind the closed door at the end of the hall, but I reached out and opened it anyway.

There were blankets hanging over the windows to block out the sun, but a small lamp was on in the corner, giving me just enough light to see my sister huddled in between the nightstand and the wall.

“Corrie!” I yelled as I rushed around the bed and dropped down to my knees.

I yanked the tape away from her mouth and then started trying to untie her hands, but the zip ties around her wrists were too tight and had already started cutting into her skin.

“Oh, honey. Fuck! Are you okay? What did he do to you?”

“He lied to me,” my sister sobbed. “He said. . . I thought he . . . Then he hit me, and I woke up here. He was . . . He was going to . . .”

I pulled her to my chest and held her tightly as she sobbed and blubbered out broken sentences that painted a picture of the terror she’d experienced in the last few hours.

“Did he touch you, Corrie?”

“Not the way you’re thinking.” Corrie wailed again before she said, “He told me he

was going to, though!”

“He’s not gonna do shit, baby girl,” I promised as I stood up with her in my arms.
“I’ll make sure of that.”

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“Mr. Michaels, Mr. Bowles will pay for what he did through the punishment of the court system, but he will face challenges the rest of his life due to the injuries you inflicted upon him. Justified or not, it’s not your place to play judge and jury .

. . and, in this case, almost executioner.

For that reason, I believe that you should be incarcerated for at least a portion of the time the federal prosecutor has requested.

I’m going to amend the deal you made with the prosecutor's office to fit your specific situation.”

It was hard to focus on the judge’s voice with the sound of my mom sobbing somewhere behind me, but then I heard my dad’s supportive murmuring and knew she'd be okay. Just like I knew that Corrie would be okay, too, and that was all that mattered.

“I don’t believe probation is sufficient punishment for dragging another human being behind a moving vehicle, but I also believe that a twenty-year sentence is excessive.

Instead, I’m going to sentence you to seven years in the federal penitentiary and one year in an approved program to help reintegrate you into society.

In eight years you’ll have the opportunity to restart your life, which is more than I can

say for your victim. ”

My heart was racing as I shook my head to clear it, wondering if I’d heard the judge correctly. Instead of losing twenty years of my life, I would only have to give up eight. I could do anything for a little while, and in relation to twenty years, eight wasn’t bad at all.

I turned and looked at my dad, who grimaced before he nodded, and when I met my mom’s eyes, I whispered, “I’ll be okay. I promise.”

“Mr. Michaels, you are hereby remanded to the federal penitentiary system for the duration of your sentence.”

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ELEVEN YEARS AGO

When I pulled into the parking lot of Three Sheets, I was surprised at how busy it was for being this early in the afternoon.

The last time I talked to Dad about the bar, he said business was good, but he’d obviously downplayed things.

That made sense because Dad was a master of understatement and wasn’t exactly verbose on a good day.

I parked in the line of motorcycles at the front of the building and sat there for a few minutes, just enjoying the view.

It had been way too long since I’d seen this place, but it looked just the same as it always had.

As a creature of habit, Dad didn't like change, and that showed in the layers of paint on the exterior of the building.

The name on the side of the bar had to be at least half an inch thick with layers of paint by now, but the place was a local icon, so I guess his marketing had worked out in our favor after all.

The door opened, and a woman hurried outside before she darted around the side of the building.

After years of working in this bar with my family, her behavior pinged my radar.

I got off my bike so I could check on her.

She was probably just feeling sick and needed fresh air, but just in case there was something else going on, it would make me feel better to know that she was alright.

I peeked around the corner and found the young woman bent in half with her ass against the wall and her head between her knees. As I walked closer, I heard her mumbling to herself and thought my first inclination had been right - too much alcohol. Dad did have a heavy pour.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" I asked.

She abruptly stood upright and looked at me. Her face transformed from fear to happiness when she saw me, and before I knew what was happening, she launched herself into my arms.

"You're home!" The feel of the woman in my arms was a welcome one, and even though I had no idea who she was, it just felt right to hold her against me. "I thought I wouldn't get to see you before I left!"

Her raspy voice struck a chord somewhere, and I leaned back far enough to look down into her face before I asked, “Dalisay?”

“Are there so many women throwing themselves into your arms that you can’t remember all of their names?” Dali asked with a grin before she laid her head on my chest and hugged me tightly. “I’m so glad you’re home, Anthony.”

“What’s going on, Dali? Why are you out here by yourself?”

“There are just so many people inside who want to hug me and talk that I needed a minute to myself. I’m sort of freaking out, and I don’t like to do that with an audience.”

“Why are you freaking out?”

“I fly out tomorrow.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Rhode Island. I graduated last week, and I leave for Officer Candidate School tomorrow.”

“You’re kidding! Little Dali’s going into the Navy?”

“What’s this?” Dali asked as she ran her thumb over the patch on my chest. “Is that your road name?”

“It is. I made some friends while I was gone, and one of them started calling me Navy. It stuck.” I laughed before I said, “Holy shit, Dali. I can’t believe it’s you! You’ve grown up since the last time I saw you.”

“I was what? Thirteen? I’d like to think I’ve changed a bit since then.”

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That was an understatement. The awkward little girl with braces had turned into a beautiful woman, but the smile that so easily transformed her face was still the same. Stunning, pure, and downright infectious.

She'd gone from a gangly teenager to a voluptuous woman, and holding her in my arms was almost enough to make me forget that I'd known her since she was just a child.

"Anthony?"

Dali and I looked over to see my sister standing at the corner of the building, and she ran toward me as I let go of Dalisay. When I pulled Corrie into my arms, she was a blubbering mess, and there were tears in my eyes. "You're finally home!"

"I got here as soon as I could," I assured her. When my sister sobbed again, I swallowed to get past the lump in my throat and whispered in her ear, "You promised you wouldn't cry for me again."

"I lied," Corrie wailed.

I glanced up and saw Dalisay had tears streaming down her face.

I lifted my arm to pull her into our embrace.

She'd been beside my sister through thick and thin and was the voice of reason she hadn't listened to when that monster was grooming her.

When it was all over and I was rotting in prison, Dalisay had stepped up and been her rock that helped hold her steady as she reeled with unnecessary guilt, knowing I would be spending years behind bars after that day.

My sister endured years of therapy to work through the guilt she carried.

She had a hard time letting go of the fact that her gullibility had changed not just her life but mine too.

My parents and I tried to assure her that what I'd done to that man had been my decision, but she still felt like it was all her fault.

Dalisay stood by her through it all and helped pull her out of the deep depression that followed and the trap of reckless behavior when she started spiraling. I owed her so much for helping my sister when I couldn't.

The little girl I remembered had turned into such a stunning beauty with a smile that I knew would haunt my dreams, especially now that she was leaving town.

But we had all made choices, and our lives were moving in the directions that they needed to be. Luckily, mine had brought me home. Fingers crossed that Dali felt just as happy with her decisions that were taking her out into the world.

It was just unfortunate that our paths were taking us to opposite coasts because I'd like nothing more than to get to know the strong young woman she'd become.

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SIX MONTHS AGO

DALI

The smoke alarm was making me crazy and needed to be destroyed.

As soon as I could get my eyes open, I was going to do just that.

It would be simpler to just change the battery, but not nearly as rewarding.

It was grating on my last nerve right along with the scratchy blanket pulled up to my neck and the fact that I was wearing socks.

How did that happen? I went barefoot at every opportunity, so I never wore socks to bed.

Yet here I was beneath a shitty blanket that could use a gallon of fabric softener, strangled toes that needed to escape as soon as possible, and a sound that was annoying enough to send even the most sane person into a fit of rage.

Not that I had any illusions that I was sane, but dreaming about taking a hammer to an innocent little smoke alarm was unhinged, even for me.

When the sound didn't stop, I tried to roll over but realized that I couldn't move. There was something on my chest, and from the weight of it, I guessed it must be an elephant. Possibly a hippo.

Which animal was heavier? Elephants were bigger in size, right? But were they heavier? Images of both animals flickered through my mind, and I pondered that question. Maybe a hippo just seemed so large because I'd never seen the two animals next to each other for comparison.

Either way, it was making it almost impossible to move and very hard to breathe.

I finally willed my eyes open and then slammed them closed again when they were

assaulted by a fluorescent light that made me feel as if I was staring into the sun.

“Commander Albright?” I heard an unfamiliar voice ask.

“Turn the light off,” I ordered without thinking. As an aside, since I wasn’t sure who I was speaking to, I added, “Please.”

I sensed movement, and then the voice said, “I turned off the overhead light. Will you open your eyes now, please?”

I squinted to make sure I wasn’t about to be blinded again and then opened them wide before I blinked a few times to gain focus on the woman’s face above me.

“Who are you, and where am I?” I asked, my voice raspier than usual. I moved my tongue around in my mouth and then licked my dry lips. “I need a drink.”

The woman moved aside for a second and then reappeared holding a cup with a straw bent so it could reach my mouth. I took a couple of long draws and then sighed, already tired from that small exertion.

As my eyes fluttered closed, the woman ordered, “I need you to stay awake for just a few minutes so I can ask you some questions.”

This time, her voice held authority, so I did as ordered before I asked, “Who are you?”

“I’m Dr. Perkins. You’re at the medical center in Portsmouth. Do you know how you got here?”

“My guess is by plane, but I really don’t know.” Suddenly, I remembered the sound of a crash and horrible crushing pain in my chest before everything went black.

“What hit me?”

“Do you remember the accident?”

“Sort of?”

“How do you feel?”

“Like there’s an elephant sitting on my chest, and my toes are choking to death.”

“Say again?”

“I can’t think with socks on.”

I felt someone at the foot of the bed move the blanket, and then my toes were suddenly free again. That made me feel immeasurably better if I didn’t consider the other aches and pains.

“Better now?” When I nodded, Dr. Perkins laughed before she said, “The weight you’re feeling in your chest is from the wrap. You were injured . . .”

“There was a crash, and then . . . The beams weren’t strapped down, and they were sliding around. Is everyone else okay?”

“You managed to knock them out of the way and took the brunt of the hit,” Dr. Perkins explained.

“The others had some minor injuries, but you’ve got a broken clavicle, a cracked sternum, and multiple broken ribs, one of which punctured your lung.

We’ve had you in a medically induced coma for the past five days to give you a head

start on healing while the machines helped you breathe, but we reduced that medication so you could wake up. ”

“Well, whatever you replaced it with is fantastic .”

Dr. Perkins chuckled as my eyes drifted closed. “Enjoy your nap, Commander Albright. You earned it.”

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N AVY

“Would you look at that?” Ben said from his seat at the end of the bar.

He was one of our regulars - and by that, I meant a customer I saw for more hours a week than I did my own family - called out from his seat at the end of the bar.

I saw that he was watching the news, like he did at this time every day, and walked over to see what was happening.

“The Oceanside Police Department hasn’t released any more details on the victim, but a cursory examination of his background puts him in the same category as the other victims. The social media release detailing the injuries inflicted by the perpetrator has garnered over a thousand comments today alone, with most of them commending whoever tortured the victim while also asking the police department why someone with his record wasn’t already behind bars. ”

My sister was standing below the television, reading the captions along with the rest of us, and laughed before she asked, “Did you see the smirk on her face when she called those guys victims?”

“She could barely choke out the word,” Dad agreed. He lifted his mug toward Ben and said, “To whoever is out there doing the Lord’s work, may he be successful and invisible because he damn sure doesn’t deserve to be punished.”

“Hell yeah, brother!” Ben said loudly before he tapped his mug against Dad’s. “Those men aren’t gonna be able to wipe their own asses, let alone hurt anyone else.”

“Not sure what I’m gonna do if I ever run into a man who’s missing both hands. I can guarantee you I’ll take a second look just to make sure he doesn’t need an ass whoopin’.”

“What are the odds, right?” Corrie asked.

“They should start a survivors club or something,” Ben suggested. He burst out laughing before he said, “Oh, wait . . . sex offenders aren’t supposed to hang out with each other, are they?”

“I’d hope not,” I muttered before I went back to the register so I could count the day’s sales and turn it over for Karlie, who would be in later to cover the bar this evening.

“Might be nice if they did,” Dad said cheerfully. “It would give somebody with violence in their heart a place for target practice.”

“Or someone could just drag them behind a truck,” Corrie suggested with an evil laugh before she bumped me with her hip. She asked, “Do you need me for anything else today? I’ve still got some packing to do, and we need to be at the airport by seven.”

“Nope. Go home. I’ve been looking forward to your time off for weeks now.”

“Oh, shut up. You know you’ll miss my smiling face around here.”

“Not a chance,” I said as I put the credit card slips and extra cash in a bag to take to the safe. “Seriously, though, check in now and then to let us know you’re okay.”

“Are you afraid James is going to throw me over the side of the boat?”

“It’s a ship, Corrie. Jesus.”

“Considering the family she grew up in and the people she surrounds herself with, you would think she’d know that by now,” Ben said with a guffaw.

“She does it to piss us off,” Dad said before he pointed at Corrie and asked, “Do you need anything before you go? You know not to carry too much cash, right?”

“We’re not going to explore the streets of Seattle, Dad. We’ll land and go straight to the boat.” Corrie grinned at me before she said, “We’ve got everything we need, and I’ll send you a text from each port.”

“Love you, brat,” I said before I wrapped my sister in a hug. “Y’all have fun.”

Corrie hugged and kissed our dad before she blew a kiss at Ben and left through the front door.

I caught a glimpse of the sunny day and hurried to finish up so I could leave as soon as my relief arrived.

I’d had a long day, which seemed even longer since I barely got any sleep last night, but that was by choice.

I knew that some time in the water would make today much better. Plus, it would give me some time by myself to take care of one little task I had left after yesterday’s adventures.

“Go on, son. I can see you champing at the bit,” Dad called out.

“I can wait for Karlie.”

“I can, too, considering I’ve been running this place since you were just a twinkle in your mama’s eye.”

“She always hated it when you said shit like that,” I reminded him with a laugh. Decision made, I walked toward the office and said, “I’m outta here, old man. Don’t drink too much, and if you do, make sure you call me for a ride.”

“Fucking bossy children are gonna be the death of me.” I heard Dad complain to Ben as I pushed through the swinging doors that led into the kitchen. Rafael was slicing jalapenos and looked up as I said, “Feed my dad soon, will you? He’s on his third beer.”

“I’ve got him covered,” Rafael assured me. “I’ll call if anything comes up.”

“I’ll be close by.”

“Are you going to visit your girlfriend?”

“The ocean isn’t my girlfriend; she’s my mistress. She makes me happy, doesn’t throw fits too often, and doesn’t give me any shit when I go a few days without paying attention to her.”

Rafael’s laughter followed me into the office as I made sure the bank bag was secure in the safe.

I waved at him over my shoulder as I left through the back door, then stopped just outside to put my head back and enjoy a glimpse of the sunshine that would be disappearing soon.

I had just enough time to go home and grab my board so I could get out on the water in time to watch the sunset.

I’d missed way too many over the years and made it a point to see as many as possible now.

Sun, surf, and the occasional beer - what else could a guy like me ask for?

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DALI

“Surprise!” Corrie squealed loudly before she rushed toward me for a hug.

At the last second, she stopped herself and gently patted me on the shoulder instead.

I burst out laughing - something I hadn’t been able to do for months due to the pain, but it didn’t hurt at all anymore.

I threw my arms around her as I yelled, “Honey, I’m home! ”

“Shut up!” Corrie yelled as she leaned back to look at my face. When I just smiled, she said, “You’re kidding me!”

“I’m free and ready to figure out what life’s got in store for someone who has absolutely no plans for the future.”

“Mom! I can’t find my straightener!”

Corrie let me go as she rolled her eyes. Over her shoulder, she called out, “It’s in the blue suitcase.”

“Suitcase?” I asked.

“We’re leaving in three hours.”

“Oh my God! I totally forgot about your trip!”

“No! I’m so glad you came by. It’s crazy right now, but then again, it almost always is. If you don’t mind the chaos, I’d love to talk while I do some last-minute packing.”

“We can wait . . .”

Corrie grabbed my hand and yanked me further into the house before she said, “Bullshit! I can’t wait to introduce you to James and Audie, and I know Antonia is going to be thrilled to see you again.”

“Okay, but I’ll get out of your hair after that.”

“Are you staying with your parents, or do you have your own place?”

“My parents moved up north to be closer to my brother, so I’m planning to stay in a hotel for a few days while I explore my options.”

“Absolutely not! We’re going to be gone for two weeks, so you’ll stay here.”

“Oh, no, Corrie. I can . . .”

“As if I’d have let you stay in a hotel anyway when we’ve got a spare bedroom.”

“But I . . .”

“Haven’t you known her long enough to know that once she gets an idea in her head, there’s no sense in arguing?”

“James! Dalisay is here!”

“I see that,” Corrie’s handsome husband said as he walked into the living room with their daughter on his hip.

He handed her over to Corrie and said, “She was steadily unpacking everything I put into the suitcase, so I gave up.” He stuck his hand out toward me and said, “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Dalisay. ”

“Call me Dali,” I insisted as I shook his hand. I’d seen the man on my video chats with Corrie but hadn’t had a chance to meet him in person yet.

My friend had found her Prince Charming, enjoyed a whirlwind romance, and gotten knocked up on her honeymoon with the first of what I assumed would be many kids, judging by the stars in her eyes.

As sad as I was that I’d missed this pregnancy, I was almost relieved.

Corrie had been a complete pain in the ass when she was pregnant with Antonia after I stepped into the role that Corrie’s deadbeat boyfriend was all too happy to abandon.

I dealt with her morning sickness, odd food cravings, and mood swings and went to a million and one appointments before I watched my goddaughter come into the world. I didn’t regret a single minute, considering that I knew that was probably as close as I’d get to motherhood myself.

Since then, I’d watched Antonia grow up from afar with occasional visits when Corrie could plan a vacation to wherever I happened to be stationed, just like my parents did when they wanted to see me.

I heard my goddaughter gasp from behind me. I spun around and grinned at her before I burst into tears at the sight of her sweet face that was now accented by makeup that she hadn’t been allowed to wear the last time we’d seen each other. “Oh my god! Oh my god! Aunt Dali!”

It was a wonderful reunion with my favorite child on the planet. Once we’d hugged

each other so tightly that we could barely breathe, I turned to meet the newest addition to the family - little Audie Ingstrom, the baby that stole my heart the second I laid eyes on her.

I took Audie out of Corrie's arms and smiled at the chubby toddler before I looked up and said, "She'll be fine here with me while you're gone."

Corrie laughed as James frantically shook his head in alarm. "Don't tempt me, Dali - although James would never go for it. He can't be away from her for more than a few hours before he starts getting antsy."

"There will be plenty of time for you to get to know her after we get home," James assured me, relieved that Corrie had shot down my idea.

"And you can stay in the spare bedroom until James finds a place for you to live."

I chuckled as I shook my head and said, "I'm not sure James sells anything in my price range."

James winked at me before he said, "We'll figure it out." He checked his watch and then looked over at Antonia and Corrie before he said, "I suggest we use Dali's presence to our advantage and finish packing while Audie is entertained."

"Go for it! I've got her."

"James, honey, can you bring in Dali's bags before we leave?" Corrie asked. She smiled at me before she said, "She's going to house-sit while we're gone."

"That's perfect! I'll carry them up after I take ours downstairs."

"Are you sure this is okay? I hate to impose."

“You’d be doing us a favor. Besides, there’s no sense in spending money on a hotel or an Airbnb when we’ve got plenty of room.”

I looked down at the baby and asked, “How did I get lucky enough to have such great friends?”

Antonia laughed as she corrected me, “We’re not friends, Aunt Dali. We’re family.”

I smiled at my goddaughter before I agreed, “Yes, we are.”

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N AVY

I leaned back in my chair and relaxed for a few minutes as I let my eyes go unfocused, looking at the image on the screen.

My mind was whirring with ideas based on the preferences and needs of this new client, and it always seemed to help my creative process when I took an imaginary step back and let my mind wander.

After a few minutes I realized that a lightning bolt moment wasn't likely to happen today, so I shut my computer down, knowing the problem would simmer in my mind throughout my day and even into my shift at the bar tonight.

It seemed crazy to think that some of my best ideas came to me in the shower or when I was doing something mundane and letting my mind wander, but that's how it almost always happened.

Over the years, I'd found that it was best not to push it.

Besides, it gave me an excuse to step outside my office and find something else to do - even if it was serving drinks to cover my sister's shift.

I wasn't surprised to see Boogie watching me when I stood up from my computer and laughed when her ears perked up and she tilted her head toward the door.

The tiny puppy I'd found on the beach, barely breathing and covered in fleas, had turned into a medium-sized dog of very uncertain heritage.

The older Boogie got, the more I was convinced she was the product of an illicit affair between someone's snobby poodle and a bad boy mutt from the wrong side of the tracks.

She was knee-high and slender with a sweet disposition when she got her way and the snotty attitude of a spoiled princess when she didn't.

Her wiry white coat was curly in spots and stick-straight in others with tufts of black and brown fur that were soft and curly.

Spicoli, her lazy companion, had also found me on the beach, but he hadn't been nearly as pitiful as Boogie.

His short brown hair was shiny and soft, and he had the unfocused gaze and attitude of a surfer who was high on much more than just life.

I was convinced that he'd have already become one with the furniture without Boogie prodding him to move now and then.

Boogie hopped up to go for a walk, excited as always, and then nipped at Spicoli when he didn't even open his eyes to see what was going on.

Spicoli rolled over onto his back before he moaned low in his throat, but that wasn't enough for Boogie, so she nipped him again.

Spicoli opened one eye and huffed at her before he closed it again and instantly started snoring loudly.

"He's not down for a walk, babe, and I'm not gonna force him because I refuse to carry his big ass home again," I explained as I left the room.

Boogie gave up on Spicoli and sprinted past me down the hall toward the living room.

Before I even had a chance to step into my flip-flops, she had gone through the doggie door with a tennis ball in her mouth.

I grabbed the lead that I only carried on the off chance I ran into some Karen who started screeching about unleashed dogs on the beach and followed Boogie out into the breezeway.

A little time playing catch with my favorite girl was the perfect way to let my mind wander so I could think of a fresh, new idea for the website I was creating for my client.

A few hours later, Boogie and I made our way back to the house, sunkissed and exhilarated after our time on the sand with occasional dips in the water to cool off.

Since we were already outside, I took the stairs to check on the rooftop garden I tended with my sister and was happy to find a lemon ready to pick as well as a few peppers and a zucchini I could use for my dinner tonight after my shift at the bar.

After a quick shower, I jotted down a few notes that had come to me under the spray and then walked out into the breezeway I shared with the other three condos in the building.

I was lucky enough to live a stone's throw from the beach in a recently renovated building with great neighbors.

Of course, the fact that one of those neighbors happened to be my sister and her family helped.

The other two residents were retired snowbirds who were only here occasionally during the summer and through the few months of winter.

The location was perfect, not only because of its access to the beach but because it was just a five-minute ride to the bar.

Investing in this property with my brother-in-law had proven to be one of my most lucrative business decisions because it gave me income from the other renters as well as the perfect place to live.

Considering the price of real estate in California, we were sitting on a gold mine, but neither of us was willing to sell since we loved living here.

A few years ago, we'd purchased the building next to ours, and the one on the other side just last year.

It gave us a substantial amount of passive income that we planned to use to buy more property in our area.

James worked hard to add to the nest egg he planned to pass on to his children, but since I had none, they'd probably end up with the money I had saved too.

Even though I wanted kids of my own, I had no illusions that would ever happen. Unfortunately, I hadn't found a woman who didn't make me crazy enough to pull out my own hair or walk out into the surf and never come back, so a family and children weren't exactly on my horizon.

Since I was open to the idea, I rarely ever passed up the opportunity for female company in the hopes I might find a woman I could build a life with, but none of them seemed up to the task.

My sister insisted that was because my dating pool mainly consisted of customers at the bar, which was not exactly the place most people found lasting love.

However, it was a great place to find companionship for at least a night. Maybe even a few.

It had been a while since I'd spent a wild weekend with anyone, and since my sister wasn't home to judge my choices, now would be the perfect time to enjoy myself.

By the time I got to the bar, I'd come up with a few more ideas for the work I needed to get back to and made the decision to call up a flight attendant who was always down for a good time. However, the shit show that greeted me the second I walked into the bar pushed those thoughts aside.

"What the fuck is going on?" I yelled when I spotted my dad sitting on a barstool with a bloody towel held up to his face.

"Now, son, don't get all worked up. It's just a few scrapes and bruises."

I looked at Raphael, who didn't seem to be in much better shape than Dad, and asked, "Did you get into a fight?"

"Obviously," Dad drawled sarcastically.

"With each other?"

Raphael just stared like I was stupid, which was probably difficult, considering his left eye was almost swollen shut.

"Jesus, Anthony. Of course we didn't fight each other," Dad said in exasperation.

Raphael snorted because even if Dad wasn't willing to admit it, we both knew it wasn't outside the realm of possibility if he'd had a little too much to drink.

"Two assholes wearing full helmets came in and demanded all the money in the register. When I told them to fuck off, they started roughing me up."

"I came out when I heard the commotion and jumped in to help, but then two more men showed up. They took off when a customer opened the door and started screaming bloody murder, and this is what we're left with."

I looked around and saw that the men had done quite a number on the bar too.

There were broken chairs tossed around along with two busted barstools.

Some of the framed pictures that had been hanging on the back wall for years were on the floor surrounded by glass shards.

Broken beer mugs were everywhere, and I could tell in an instant that they had thrown them at the walls like they were having target practice.

The door opened and daylight spilled into the dim interior, making the glass on the floor sparkle before the door shut again. I turned to find two uniformed cops taking in the sight and watched as one of them keyed the mic on his shoulder and started talking in code.

"Did you recognize them?" I asked hurriedly before the cop made it across the bar.

"No," Dad and Rafael said at the same time.

As Rafael gingerly touched his cheek, he said, "They were covered in tattoos down to their fingertips. There were letters, but I couldn't make out what they were."

“They had on motorcycle boots, but they weren’t like yours. They were fancy asshole boots with buckles and shit,” Dad added.

“Were they women?” I asked. Dad glared at me, and I put my hands up before I said, “Fancy buckles are a chick thing.”

“I did not get my ass kicked by a woman, Clark Anthony Michaels.”

“Yessir,” I said, biting back a grin even in such a dire situation.

I hadn’t heard that tone or my full name since well before my mom passed, and the jolt of fear I felt at the sound made it hard not to laugh out loud.

Instead, I turned to the officer who was now standing near us and asked, “Can you call an ambulance to have them check out my dad and Rafael?”

“We already called it in, but it may be a while.”

“Would it be better for me to just drive them to the hospital?”

The cop shook his head and said, “This is the fourth call that’s come in like this in the last hour, so we’re spread pretty thin, as are the paramedics.”

“There have been four robberies?”

The cop nodded before he said, “They started about six blocks away and worked their way down the street until they got to your bar.”

“What the fuck?” I whispered, more to myself than anyone else.

“That’s exactly what I thought,” the cop admitted. He looked at Dad and asked, “Can

you answer some questions for me?”

“Of course,” Dad said as he dropped the towel and let the cop get a good look at his face.

The officer and I both hissed at the sight before he said, “Yeah, you definitely need to see a doctor.”

“I’ve had worse,” Dad said with a shrug.

“Maybe, but you weren’t damn near seventy years old when that happened,” I reminded him. I glanced over at Rafael before I said, “You need to be checked out too.”

“I’m not gonna argue.”

“I’ll put a sign on the door saying we’re closed for the day. Maybe a few,” I said as I walked around the bar, glass crunching with every step I took. “It’s gonna take at least that long to get this place cleaned up.”

“I could probably use a day or two off.”

I saw Dad shrug and then rolled my eyes when the cop started laughing.

Once he was able to pull himself together, he asked, “Do those cameras work?”

“Sure do,” I told him with a grin. “I’ll put everything we’ve got on a thumb drive for you.”

“Perfect.”

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DALISAY

“Well, hello there!” I exclaimed in shock when I noticed two dogs napping in the shade of the courtyard.

One of them jumped up to greet me, while the other just lifted his head and huffed before he laid back down on the grass and closed his eyes again.

The odd-looking one sniffed me excitedly before it sat on its haunches and lifted a paw.

As I bent over to shake, I said, “You are just the cutest!”

I sat down in the Adirondack chair nearby and put my laptop and drink on the small table attached to it before I bent forward and showered the dog with scratches and pats.

I looked around, thinking I’d somehow missed the dogs’ owners, but when I was assured I was alone, I wondered who they belonged to.

The building only had four units, as far as I could tell, and there was no way to get in or out without access through the tall iron gate nestled in the brick patio wall out front or the garage doors on the bottom level.

Both animals were wearing collars and seemed clean and healthy.

It was obvious that their owner must take good care of them, although I wasn’t sure how safe it was for them to be outside alone for however long they had already been here.

I decided that was a problem for later, so as soon as the odd little dog, whose collar told me her name was Boogie, got bored and walked off, I settled my laptop on my knees and started working on my resume.

My drink was gone, and I was starving by the time I was content with the progress, and the sun was starting to set - something I didn't want to miss again.

Of all the things I'd missed most about home, watching the sun set over the water was close to the top of the list. I couldn't wait to get back out in the surf and promised myself I'd find a board as soon as my new doctor released me.

I was having to work through some respiratory issues caused by complications from the infection that developed after my lung had been punctured, but I felt stronger every day.

Although I knew there was no way I was strong enough to tackle any waves yet.

When I got up from the chair, I saw both dogs watching me, so I blew them a kiss before I walked off, hoping I would see them again.

They were the perfect companions - one didn't care what I was doing, but the other one occasionally interrupted my work for some attention before she wandered off again.

I had just started up the stairs when the dogs caught up to me and then walked beside me all the way to the top floor.

"Oh, no! You can't follow me home, you guys!"

When we got to the landing, I looked down and asked, "Where do you live?"

As if in answer, the larger dog meandered toward the door across the way.

That's when I noticed the pet door and realized they must belong to Corrie's neighbor.

I smiled because, as hard as living in an apartment might be for dogs of their size, at least they had access to the courtyard whenever they wanted to visit it.

"Maybe I should get a dog once I'm settled," I said aloud as I entered the code for Corrie's door. I laughed bitterly before I added, "I should probably find somewhere to live first.

That was on my agenda for tomorrow and probably the next few weeks along with finding a job.

Neither of which sounded like any fun at all.

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N AVY

I ran my hands over my face and leaned back in my chair as I yawned loudly.

The program I'd written to help me scour the different social media sites and find Oceanside residents with knuckle tattoos had been successful.

So successful, in fact, that it had brought back thousands of results that I had to weed through to try and find the men responsible for what happened to my dad and Rafael.

I was completely out of my element here, but I knew a few men who would love to take this ball and run with it, especially when they found out that my father had been injured.

I glanced at the clock and realized I'd been up for well over twenty-four hours, and more than half of that time had been spent sitting in this chair after working to clean up the mess in the bar.

Dad was trying to look at the bright side of the situation and had decided to keep it closed for a few extra days to get some well-needed maintenance done as well as a couple of updates he'd been putting off.

I chuckled when I thought of the sign he'd posted on the front door explaining why Three Sheets wouldn't be open for a few days, referencing "the little pussy assholes who trashed the place" who were welcome to come back anytime for a nice meal full of buckshot.

Yesterday, I wondered how the perps had made it out without any injuries only to find out that Dad and Rafael had been taken by surprise.

Neither of them was behind the bar near the shotgun when the men burst into the building.

Considering the laws in our state, getting their asses kicked was a lot easier to get over than going to prison for having a sawed-off shotgun behind the bar.

Over the years, just the presence of the weapon had deterred anything major, but I had a feeling that if Dad had pulled it out yesterday, I'd be busy burying bodies rather than cyberstalking men with tattooed hands.

Hell, I'd prefer to be working with a shovel than being cooped up inside while I search for a needle in a haystack.

I shot off a quick text to a couple of my club brothers, who I knew would love to sink their teeth into this mystery and wouldn't be opposed to getting some blood on their hands when we did find the men, and then took a quick shower while I waited for them to respond.

Preacher, an old friend from my time living in Tenillo, was the first one to call. He was a bit gruff and to the point until he found out what had happened. Then he got angry, and I knew he was hooked.

"They were wearing bike helmets?" Preacher asked.

"Yeah. Full-face helmets with the face shields down and no stickers or identifiers as far as Dad and Rafael can remember."

"And they all had tattoos on their fingers?"

“Letters and symbols, but Rafael said he was too busy dodging their fists to decipher what they were.”

“Hmm,” Preacher hummed. “And you ran a program to find the ones in your area?”

“I did, but it came back with more than I would have thought. I need to figure out how to narrow the search.”

“Shiny buckles,” Preacher said, thinking out loud.

“They all wore heavy boots. The tread on one of the tracks I found after the guy walked through some spilled grenadine looked about my size. I’d say a size thirteen or fourteen with a waffle sole.”

“They’re all wearing the same boots and helmets. Like a uniform,” Preacher said. It wasn’t a question. I could hear the video recordings I’d sent him from our security system, and I knew he was gathering details just like I had. He asked, “You don’t have any video of their getaway?”

“No. They split up and disappeared like ghosts. But get this shit! They reappeared twenty minutes later at a mom-and-pop convenience store up the block.”

“They were hitting businesses one after another down Oceanside Boulevard? Were they just trying to get caught?”

“You have to admit that it’s a solid plan. While the cops were busy figuring out what happened at the first location, they hit the next few and then on and on down the line. In total, they hit fifteen within an hour and a half.”

“In and out. Quick work. No qualms about violence. Seems well-planned.”

“But why go for the small businesses that don’t have a lot of cash on hand?”

“That’s the rub, isn’t it?” Preacher asked rhetorically. “I hate thieves.”

“Same.”

“Well, I think I just found my new pastime.”

“What’s that?”

“Figuring out who these fuckers are so you can go kill ‘em.”

“That sounds like a plan to me.”

“I’m gonna share this with Hammer.”

“I sent him a message, but I haven’t gotten a response yet.”

“What about Ajax?”

“Same thing.”

“Hmm. I’ll get on the phone with them, and we can split up some tasks to get to the bottom of this even quicker.”

“Much thanks, brother.”

“Anytime.”

“When are you going to bring Blue out so she can learn to surf?”

“When she gets over being terrified of water where she can’t see the bottom and you don’t live in California anymore.”

“Next summer?”

Preacher started chuckling and then hung up on me, which made me laugh.

The man was a loyal club brother who I’d met while I was living in Tenillo, and his wife was a pistol who took no shit from anyone, especially him.

They were a match made in heaven, and I aspired to have a relationship like theirs.

But that would require me to do something other than camp out in my office staring at a computer or stand behind the bar in a dimly lit dive where no one under the age of forty came for anything other than a greasy burger on their way to somewhere more fun.

I wasn’t going to do either of those things today, though. Right now, I needed sleep, and lots of it.

When I woke up, I had slept so hard that I felt hungover but much more like myself. I had a little more than an hour before sunset, and despite the fact that I could be doing more productive things, I couldn’t resist the call of the ocean and grabbed my board before I took off toward the beach.

It would be nice to set my troubles aside for a few hours and soak in some rays while I watched the magical end of the day.

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DALI

“Why is your owner not looking for you?” I asked the dog who had decided to nap on the end of the chaise where I’d been relaxing. “And where is your sister?”

In the last few days, I had settled in as Corrie’s houseguest. I had accomplished a lot even though I hadn’t left the property even once. The urge to go down to the beach was strong, but I had decided that I wasn’t going to go near it until I could go into the water.

I planned to do whatever it took to get my doctor to release me for swimming, but that appointment wasn’t until next week. I had a few more days to kill until I had to venture out into the world again. Until then, I was more than happy to live on the things I had delivered from the local market.

The evening after I found that grassy courtyard oasis, I explored further and found another one on the rooftop.

That one had a soaking pool, plenty of umbrellas for when I needed some shade, and a wine fridge that I took the liberty of stocking with my second delivery - this one from a nearby liquor store that had their inventory listed online and was happy to do my shopping for me.

As an unemployed homeless woman who was lonely, sad, and unable to exert herself for fear of her heart exploding, my to-do list really didn’t have anything on it other than to get lost in a book and drink several glasses of wine.

By the time the big, lazy dog had joined me on the rooftop, I was on my fourth glass, although it wasn’t actually a glass at all.

I had forgotten to bring a wine glass up and was too damn lazy to go down and get one, so I searched the outdoor kitchen and found the perfect cup that was unbreakable and had a lid.

I was considering using this kind of cup all the time, seeing as how I'd already dropped the damn thing twice!

Not that I was drunk or anything.

In trying to convince myself of that, I surmised that I had only had two regular-sized glasses of wine since I was using a small cup. That made me sound less like a drunk and more like a responsible adult . . . or at least someone sober enough to math.

"You don't talk much, do you, buddy?" I asked as I ran my foot down the dog's back.

He moaned, so I did it again. After a few minutes, I found that I was skilled at multitasking and could sip my wine with one hand, hold my e-reader with the other, and rub the dog at the same time.

"Look at me. I've got skills! They're not marketable, and they're never going to make me a dime, but I have them, right?"

He lifted his head and stared at me for a few seconds as if to ask, "You realize that I can't answer, right?"

"I know you can't talk, and in my opinion, that makes you the perfect man.

You've got great hair, good manners, and you don't talk my ear off or try to tell me what to do.

Better yet, you don't bitch when I get a little sloshed all alone while I feel sorry for myself.

" I lifted my glass and said, "And I'm not really drinking alone if you're here! "

The dog's head flopped back onto the lounge as he sighed.

"You're being very judgmental right now, Schmoopie.

I'm not a fan. Zero stars. Would not recommend.

" My phone buzzed, and I almost knocked over the wine bottle trying to grab it.

I was still laughing to myself when I looked at it and announced, "Oh! Speaking of judgment, it's my mom!

She's gonna be unimpressed, worried, and irritated if she hears me slurring, so I'm gonna just pass on that for now. "

I tried to get into my book again, but I was having problems making out the words. My e-reader was backlit by the setting sun and made it hard to focus. I'd probably have better luck once it went down.

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Until then, I would just enjoy the sunset and more wine. Thank goodness it was a small cup and only counted as half because who sits alone and drinks five glasses of wine? I tipped the bottle up to top myself off and was surprised to find it was empty.

“Well, shit, Schmoopie! Why you gotta drink all the good stuff?” I asked. The damn dog was really starting to act like a man by ignoring me in my time of need, so I huffed at him before I said, “Lookee here! I’ve got another bottle!”

When I accidentally knocked the empty cup off the armrest of my chair, it rolled too far away for me to pick it up, so I just took a sip from the bottle itself.

Of course, I didn’t plan to drink it. I had just brought it with me to put in the wine fridge for some other day. But I was here, as was the bottle, so why the hell not, right?

Right.

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NAVY

“Where in the hell is your brother?” I asked Boogie as I walked through the apartment looking for Spicoli. “I swear to God, if he’s passed out in the courtyard, I am not gonna carry his big ass up the stairs for dinner. He can just starve for all I care.”

Boogie just sat next to her bowl, watching me search high and low for Spicoli - not

that I had to search very hard since he was a big guy and there weren't many places for him to hide.

"What the fuck?" I whispered to myself as I stopped in the middle of the living room and looked around. "It's not like him to miss a meal. The dog can't hear me calling him from three feet away, but he could hear the sound of his kibble hitting the bowl even if he'd been born without ears."

Boogie walked toward the front door and stood there waiting for me, knowing that I couldn't resist going downstairs to find Spicoli for my own peace of mind.

Once we were in the breezeway, Boogie didn't run down the stairs like she usually did.

Instead, she started climbing the stairs that led to the roof.

"What the hell?" I asked as I followed her up.

Spicoli usually couldn't be bothered to go upstairs.

The only reason his lazy ass used the stairs at all was so he could go to the courtyard and relieve himself.

Getting him back upstairs for almost any reason required a lot of coaxing, a handful of treats, and a back injury those times when I gave up and just carried the bastard.

I was shocked to get to the roof and find Spicoli sharing a lounge chair with a woman who had her legs propped up on his back.

I didn't want to scare her, so I cleared my throat as I got closer and stopped about six feet away. When she didn't look over, I said, "Excuse me, ma'am?" There was still

no reaction, so I walked a little closer, angling myself around the chair so I could see her face.

I was just about to announce myself again when I heard a soft snore and knew that delicate sound hadn't come from my dog, who was also ignoring me.

I leaned forward to get a better look, wishing the string lights weren't quite so dim, and then stood up straight when I realized that this wasn't some random stranger.

It was Dalisay Albright, the girl who had annoyed the shit out of me when she was a child, made me crazy right alongside my parents as she approached her teenage years, and then blew my mind when I came home from prison because she'd turned into a ravishingly beautiful woman.

Dali had haunted my dreams since that afternoon I'd found her outside the bar. I hadn't seen her since then and took a minute to notice that she was still just as gorgeous as she'd been more than a decade ago.

Dalisay had always been petite like her Filipino mother and looked more like her than she ever had her father.

Her brown skin always looked sun-kissed, and the smattering of freckles across her nose that had been adorable when she was a kid were sexy as hell now that she was an adult.

I had to look away when I remembered that she was sleeping like the dead while I acted like a complete perv and checked out her body.

I pulled myself together and said her name a few times, but she still didn't stir. I was about to get worried until I saw the empty bottle of wine lying on its side next to one that had a cork in it, hopefully unfinished.

Dalisay Albright had gotten drunk as a skunk alone on the rooftop, and I had no idea what in the hell to do with her. Without thinking, I pulled my phone out to call my sister and then remembered that she was on a ship with her family enjoying a long-awaited honeymoon and getaway.

“Well, shit.”

It wasn't like Corrie not to let me know that she had a houseguest on the off chance that I happened to run into a stranger on my way into or out of my apartment, but I had no doubt that was where Dalisay was staying. Since she wasn't about to wake up, I couldn't ask her, but it only made sense.

I reached out and tugged on her big toe in the hopes of waking her, but all that did was annoy Spicoli, who was still camped out beneath her gorgeous legs. He opened one eye and stared at me for a second before he lifted his head and huffed.

“Have you been guarding our new neighbor, big guy?” I asked as I ran my hand over his head. “Good boy.”

With a sigh, I decided I would relieve Spicoli and take over the task and bent forward to take Dalisay into my arms. I found it funny that I wasn't nearly as annoyed at the thought of carrying her downstairs as I had been at the thought of carrying my lazy dog up.

Then again, even though I loved him, my dog wasn't a beautiful woman who smelled like sunscreen and red wine.

I knew that those vivid dreams would start back up tonight, but they'd be worse now because I knew exactly how soft her skin was and how perfectly she fit in my arms.

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N AVY

After leaving Dali at my sister's, I hadn't slept well at all and was up before dawn. After I checked the programs I'd written, I read the messages I'd received from Hammer and Preacher about what they'd found while sorting through the results I'd shared with them.

They were just as shocked as I was about the amount of men in my area with tattooed fingers, and I chuckled when Preacher started one of his replies with "Back in my day . . ." I didn't have to give him shit because Hammer beat me to it.

The majority of the ensuing messages were the men arguing with each other even though they could have walked out to their porches and just yelled back and forth.

I yawned as I checked the dogs' bowls and then gave them some attention before I went to shower and get my day started. Now that I'd managed to make it an hour without thinking of her, I let my mind wander to the gorgeous woman she'd become.

Even though Dali and my sister looked like complete opposites, they were like two peas in a pod.

The girls spent so much time together as children that our parents became friends with hers, which meant that she was at our house as much as Corrie was at hers.

Since I was eight years older than Corrie, we didn't bicker like siblings who were closer in age.

Instead, Corrie, and then Dali, became my cheering section at sporting events or anything else I happened to be doing.

After I left for boot camp, my parents told me that the girls moped around as if they'd lost their best friend, so once I graduated and was sent to my duty station, I made sure to send them postcards and trinkets every chance I got.

By the time I got out of the Navy and came home for college, the girls had flown through their preteen years and moved onto becoming rebellious teenagers who thought they were invincible.

But our lives changed drastically when Corrie made the mistake of trusting a stranger.

My parents had to handle it by themselves since I was incarcerated, so they cracked down on Corrie to make sure she was safe while getting her the therapy she needed to get past the brainwashing and terror of the kidnapping that bastard had put her through.

I knew that Dali had been by my sister through it all, even when Corrie started to rebel again.

When Corrie got pregnant, Dali rose to the occasion and took the place of the deadbeat who took off at the first sign of responsibility.

My parents couldn't sing her praises loud enough.

I still had all the pictures I had gotten from my parents while I was in prison, including one that showed a beaming Dali holding my niece just minutes after she was born.

It was through those pictures that I started to see Dalisay in a new light as the

beautiful young woman she'd become instead of the cute kid who'd followed me around all those years ago.

Once she went off to OTS, her contact with Corrie became more sporadic, but they still managed to keep in touch through email and letters. Corrie worked extra shifts at the bar to save up so she and Antonia could travel to see Dali wherever she was stationed.

I'd kept up with Dali's time in the Navy through tidbits I picked up from my sister and our parents and occasional visits from Dali's parents. The pride they had in their daughter was obvious.

Through it all, I never mentioned that I thought about her all the time, and she showed up in my dreams almost every night.

There was something about her that had always seemed to call to my soul.

When I saw her last night, that call was no longer a gentle beckoning as much as it was an intense awakening of my senses.

I wasn't sure how to act around Dali now, which was funny since we were both adults.

Last night had thrown me for a loop. Her vulnerability had been palpable, first in sleep and then through the drunken tears that came when she woke up and told me why she'd been drinking.

If I was being honest with myself, the chain of events had solidified my feelings for her as much more than old family friends, and I had veered off into salacious thoughts and dreams.

And not for the first time, as I stood under the shower and thought of her, I stroked my cock and wondered what things might be like if I ever had the chance to tell her how I felt.

I was out of breath and weak in the knees by the time my soapy hand had given me relief.

I kept remembering how she'd looked last night after I helped her get settled into my sister's guest bed, but the real torture came from the memories of the wickedly naughty things she'd said to try to convince me to stay.

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I pulled up in front of Three Sheets to find the front door propped open. When I saw Dad hauling out a trash can full of wood scraps, I jumped off my bike and jogged over in time to help him dump it into the heavy-duty steel dumpster he'd rented for the week.

"What's all this?" I asked.

"I'm expanding the pantry in the kitchen," Dad explained, a bit out of breath. "What are you doing here so early?"

"I didn't get much sleep last night, so I thought I'd get a jump on things." I looked around and then back to my dad before I tilted my head and asked, "Are you doing the work?"

During his time in the service, Dad had been injured in an electrical accident on ship that still affected his heart to this day.

That was also the explanation as to why he was missing his pinky and ring finger on

his right hand - that's where the flow of electricity exited after it scrambled his heart's electrical system.

For a man who didn't take any dietary precautions and considered a walk around the bar to fill his beer from the tap a form of cardio, he was in surprisingly good shape - that is, other than the heart problems that had given him fits since his thirties.

However, he was nearing seventy, and Corrie and I had been watching him closely since we lost Mom. Unfortunately, we couldn't motivate him to take care of himself like she had, although we tried to as often as possible without pissing him off too much.

Dad scoffed at my notion that he would be handling the woodworking and said, "If we want shelves that are level and steady, I am not the guy for the job."

I laughed before I said, "I could probably do it."

"No need. I went to the VA yesterday and got a list of contractors who could use some work. The crew has been hard at work since seven this morning, and they'll be here again tomorrow. My guess is we'll be open by this weekend."

"Really?" I asked in shock.

After some discussion, Dad had agreed to close the bar for a week, but after I found out about the improvements he wanted to make on top of dealing with the cleanup after those assholes busted up the bar, I thought it would end up taking closer to two weeks, if not three.

However, Dad didn't like to close the bar for any reason.

He knew that there were people who depended on Three Sheets to get them out of the

house.

Veterans frequented the bar because they knew they could always find someone to talk to there who could relate to their time in the service, and it provided a safe environment where they could be themselves.

Every year, we lost a few regulars to old age, illness, and sometimes even suicide, but we also gained new regulars too. They brought in fresh conversations, bonding the older guys and the newer ones - something Dad insisted was good for both.

Three Sheets wasn't just a bar; it was a community. When it was closed, there were people adrift and alone, and Dad felt the weight of that.

"The new water heater has already been installed and inspected, and the plumber is inside now, hooking the new fryers and oven up to the gas lines while another guy replaces the vent hood."

"Damn. You hired quite a crew."

"I'm not fucking around, son. I'm ready to sit my lazy ass down and enjoy a beer, but I can't do that while there's work to be done, so I found people that could do it better and faster than us."

"Do you happen to have an electrician in the bunch?" I asked.

"Possibly. What do you have in mind?"

"I'd like to have a few more outlets installed and get the wiring done for a new camera system."

"A new one?"

“We need to upgrade so that we can make out more details and won’t have to play a guessing game about who I need to find if this ever happens again.”

“You’re not gonna let the cops take care of this, are you?”

“Hell no.”

“Will you do me one favor?”

“Of course.”

“Get my wedding ring back,” Dad said sadly as he looked at his hand. “I feel naked without it.”

“When I find out who has it, I’m going to take their hand for stealing it.”

“That’s my boy,” Dad said before he slapped me on the shoulder. “Let’s go inside and get in everyone’s way while you tell me what you’ve got planned.”

“Did Corrie tell you that Dalisay would be housesitting for them?” I asked.

“No, she didn’t mention it, but I’m glad to hear the girl finally got to come home.”

“Did she leave the Navy?”

“You didn’t hear what happened?” Dad asked.

He barked out a laugh before he said, “Well, the look on your face answered that question. She was injured on ship a few months ago when a cable holding a stack of beams snapped. Dalisay happened to be on deck with some visiting officers and officials, giving them one of those bullshit tours where they strut around like royalty

and . . .” When I burst out laughing because I knew exactly what he was talking about, Dad shook his head and continued.

“Anyway, Dali pushed the others out of the way and took the brunt of it. Damn near killed the girl. She broke all of her ribs, cracked her sternum, and fucked up her collarbone and shoulder. It took her months to recover, and all she got for her troubles was a pink slip and a few medals.”

“That sucks,” I muttered.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:39 am

“I’m glad she’s back home even though her parents have moved up north to be near their other kids.”

“I heard about that.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen a picture of her, but I remember thinking that little Dalisay has become quite a beautiful woman.”

“I’ll say,” I said with a smile.

“When did you see her?” Dad asked.

“She got blotto drunk on the roof yesterday. I found her when I went looking for Spicoli and got her back to Corrie’s before I went home to bed.”

“Is that why you didn’t get much sleep?”

“I kept having dreams that woke me up.” I didn’t dare tell him what those dreams were about. I would never want to admit them out loud, and besides, their content wasn’t exactly something I was comfortable talking about with my father.

“Dreams, huh?” Dad looked pensive for a minute before he grinned and said, “She’s a gorgeous woman now, our little Dalisay. Wouldn’t you say?”

I swallowed hard before I nodded, trying to will away the flush I could feel creeping up my neck

“Funny how she’s been head over heels for you since she was about five. I wonder if that ever went away.”

“What?”

“While you were in the service, she ate up information about you as if she wouldn’t survive without it.

She kept an album that had every postcard and picture you sent her, and she handled the trinkets you sent with such care that you would have thought they were made of the most delicate porcelain.

She might have been even more heartbroken than your mom and your sister when you were arrested and sent to prison. It nearly broke her.”

“I had no idea.”

“Well, now you do,” Dad said simply, but when he smiled at me, there was a gleam in his eye that hadn’t been there before.

“But what are the odds that she still has a crush on me, and even if she does, would she ever act on it? Corrie would probably kill me anyway.”

“My guess is that your sister wants her friend to be happy, and she firmly believes that you’re one of the best men she’s ever known. Seems to me that she may be all for it.”

“You think so?”

“You’ve got some time before she gets back. If I were you, I’d make the most of it. Just remember that it’s a lot easier to ask for forgiveness than permission, especially

if things work out the way I think they will.”

“So, you think I should ask Dalisay out?”

“I think you should do much more than that, son, but that would be a good start.”

???

DALI

It took some effort to sit up and put my feet on the floor, but I managed even though it felt like my head could explode any minute now.

I was completely disoriented when I woke up in bed because the last thing I remembered was watching a surfer paddle out on his board to soak up the last of the sunset.

My drunken sleep was filled with dreams of the sun, surf, and, oddly enough, my lifetime crush - Corrie’s older brother.

It made sense that I would dream about the man. He looked like the ultimate California surfer with his sun-streaked hair, gorgeous smile, and fit body.

At least, he was fit the last time I saw him, but that was years ago.

He had probably gone soft around the middle and lost his tan because he spent too much time behind his computer.

I knew from my conversations with Corrie that he was single.

Although Corrie couldn’t stand his choices when it came to dating thus far.

Even though Corrie adored her older brother, we didn't discuss him often. It was usually just in passing when she complained about something he said or the woman he was dating. She buttoned those conversations up quickly, though, because she didn't want to hurt my feelings.

I, Dalisay Albright, had been head over heels for Anthony since before I even understood what a crush was. As my best friend, Corrie knew that and had shared my dream that Anthony and I would get married someday so we could be real sisters.

But then Anthony had gone to prison, and my young dreams were shattered.

By the time he moved to Texas to serve the remainder of his sentence, I was almost done with college and had a plan for my life that took me far away from home.

So, knowing that there wouldn't be a happy ending that included my girlhood crush, Corrie and I avoided talking about him for the most part.

That didn't mean I'd ever stopped thinking about him, though, and that was one of the reasons I didn't want to hear about his life now. The last thing I needed was to reignite my old flame by learning details of what he was like or what he was doing.

When I laughed at myself, I couldn't stifle the moan that came next.

I was almost positive my head was about to detonate.

My stomach was churning, and I knew that if I didn't find a way to calm it down, I'd end up on my knees in the bathroom, and that was the last thing I wanted.

If I threw up right now, there was no way I'd come out of it alive.

Why had I thought it was a good idea to drink so much? And how in the hell had I

managed to make it back downstairs without killing myself?

Yes, I was down in the dumps, but I knew that killing nearly two bottles of wine alone was too much - especially since it wasn't the first time this had happened.

My life was off the rails, and I had no idea which direction to go.

My career in the Navy was no longer on the horizon thanks to some guy who hadn't gotten enough sleep the night before and forgot to follow safety protocols.

While it was no fault of my own that my life had changed so drastically, it was my burden to bear.

And chugging cheap wine until I blacked out was not the best way to bear it.

Especially when I felt like the walking dead the next day.

I lurched off the bed and sprinted to the bathroom when my stomach rolled over and almost didn't make it in time.

Some mindless television and napping with a side of over-the-counter pain relievers managed to get me through the morning. While recovering from my hangover, I came to the realization that I needed to change things up, or I'd probably just end up in the same situation tomorrow.

I had to get out into the world, at least for a while.

The best place to clear my mind and center myself had always been the beach, so I packed one of the beach bags I found in the laundry room.

Armed with bottled water, sunscreen, two towels, a floppy hat that had been hanging

on the hook next to the bag, and a paperback I'd carried across the country, I was ready for a day in the sand.

Ready for a fresh start and some sunshine, I threw open the door to walk outside and tripped over the dog sprawled out there.

My sunglasses went flying, as did everything I'd just packed so neatly into my bag, and I ended up on my ass with my legs sprawled over the big lug, who didn't seem the slightest bit fazed.

I took a second to catch my breath and assess my injuries and was surprised to find that the only thing injured was my pride.

"Schmoopie! What are you doing out here?" I asked as I leaned forward to run my hands over the large dog's fur. "Did I hurt you? Are you okay?"

Of course, he didn't answer. As a matter of fact, he didn't even lift his head to look at me. He raised one ear and then let it fall again before he sighed, and I leaned back on my hands to stare at him.

"Have you been outside this whole time?" I looked down the way and saw the smaller dog poking her head out of the doggie door. I looked back at the big dog before I asked, "Can you even fit through that thing?"

The smaller dog sprinted toward me with a ball in her mouth, eagerly expecting me to play since I was already down on her level.

"I wish I could take you to the beach with me, sweetheart," I said as I rubbed her. "I bet you'd have a blast out there."

The dog must have understood me because her entire body started vibrating with

excitement just before she sprinted toward the stairs.

“Oh, no!” I whispered to myself as I hurried to get up. I didn’t know her name, so I just yelled, “Come back!”

I looked down at the lazy dog and laughed. “Do you get excited about anything?”

“The only thing he ever gets excited about is b-a-c-o-n.”

I spun around and was surprised to see Anthony walking up the stairs. Without thinking, I ran toward him just like I had when I was younger.

“Hey, Dali,” Anthony said as he wrapped his arms around me. “Are you feeling okay today?”

“I’m fine,” I assured him as I stepped back so I could see his face. “Why do you ask?”

“No hangover?”

“Oh, God! I thought it was another dream!”

“You dream about me?”

“Um, no. I mean, you’re Anthony . . .”

“Call me Navy.”

“Why?”

“Only my family calls me Anthony.”

“But . . .”

“You’re not my family, Dalisay.”

“I know, but I’m Corrie’s friend and . . . Why are we talking about this?” I asked.

“Are you going to the beach?” Anthony - I mean, Navy - asked as he looked at the bag on the ground.

“That’s where I was headed, but I got sidetracked by my neighbor’s dogs.”

“Are they bothering you?”

I ignored his question and asked, “What are you doing here? Did Corrie ask you to check on her plants or something?”

“Yeah, but I’ll let you do that instead since you’re staying here.”

“Right.” But that didn’t explain why he was back unless it was just to check to make sure I survived.

I was shocked when he nudged the big dog with his boot and said, “Get up and go home, lazy ass.”

“Be nice to Schmoopie. He’s a big sweetie.”

Anthony rolled his eyes and said, “He’s a piece of furniture that overeats and farts too much.” He nudged the dog again before he said, “Go home, Spicoli.”

“Spicoli?”

The big dog lifted his head and huffed before he lumbered to his feet and stood in front of Anthony patiently. Anthony leaned over and scratched back and forth down the dog's sides before the dog walked across the breezeway and disappeared through the doggie door.

"Yeah, his name is Spicoli, and the spastic one is Boogie."

Just then, Boogie dashed up the stairs and skidded to a halt before she dropped her ball at Anthony's feet. He looked at me and asked, "Did you happen to say the b-word?"

"Bitch?"

"Shhh!" Anthony hissed as the dog started spinning in circles. "That sounds way too much like b-e-a-c-h, and she'll expect me to take her out."

"I may have mentioned that I was going . . . there and couldn't take her with me."

The dog started yipping as she bounced around, and Anthony smiled before he said, "Give me a minute to get changed because it looks like we're going to the beach with you."

I thought that sounded like a wonderful idea.

N AVY

“You live across the hall?”

I nodded before I asked, “Corrie never mentioned that to you?”

“Maybe? I’m not sure. We talk so sporadically that it’s hard to absorb all the catching up we have to do when we do talk.”

“Why don’t you talk very often?”

“She’s a busy mom, and I’m busy with . . . I was busy with my career.”

“Was, huh? Dad told me what happened.”

“Yeah, I’m officially a disabled veteran now.”

“You sound pissed about that.”

“I had a plan, and this was not part of it.”

“Plans only work until they don’t.”

“I hadn’t finished what I set out to do.”

“And what was that?” I asked as I put my hand on her lower back to guide her out of the path of some skateboarders.

“I planned to retire from the Navy after twenty years and then open a business.”

“What kind of business?”

Dali gave me a lopsided smile before she said, “I didn’t have that part decided yet because I still had ten years before retirement was even possible!”

“Well, there’s no time like the present, right?”

She looked at the ground when she said, “I guess.”

“I’m sure you have plenty of marketable skills, Dali.”

“How would you know? I haven’t talked to you in years, Anthony.”

“Navy.”

“I’ve always called you Anthony. Why does that have to change now?”

I decided to take a risk, something I didn’t do very often, and grabbed Dali’s hand before I stopped in my tracks. She was still looking at our clasped hands when I explained, “Because I don’t want to be Corrie’s older brother Anthony anymore.”

“She’s probably going to have something to say about that.”

“Do you know what I want to be instead?”

“Certifiable?” Dali asked.

“The guy who is going to take you on a date and then kiss you goodbye at the door before he tries really hard to resist pulling you into his own place and doing wicked

and wonderful things until you're screaming his name."

Dali took a few seconds to process that before she asked, "Well, Navy, when are you taking me out?" I chuckled, and she tugged on my hand before she said, "While you decide, I'd like to get my feet in the water. I've tried to resist the pull, but I just can't anymore."

I kept my eye on Boogie as she ran ahead of us and didn't stop at the water's edge. Instead, she sprinted into the surf and then dove under once she was deep enough.

Dali laughed at Boogie's exuberance, and I just shook my head, knowing how hard it would be to get her out and home.

"I don't know that I've ever seen a dog so excited to be in the water before."

"The more I think about it, the more I think she might have come from the water. She's probably some sort of hybrid fish-dog thing that's more content in water than on land. I found Boogie right over there," I said, motioning toward the large rocks that separated the sand from the sidewalk.

"Why did you name her Boogie?" Dali asked.

"Because her ass never stopped wiggling, even though she was half dead when I found her."

"And the other dog? Spicoli?" Dali started laughing before she asked, "Why did you name him that?"

"He's so laid-back that he reminds me of a stoned surfer dude that never gets in a hurry or lets anything bother him."

“Like the guy from that old movie.”

“Exactly. They have a lot in common.”

“I just realized that I can get a pet now!” Dali’s excitement was beautiful to watch, but she suddenly frowned and said, “I should probably find a place to live first, though.”

“James can help you out, I’m sure.”

“That’s what Corrie said, but I have a feeling that anything he has will be way out of my price range.”

I shrugged before I suggested, “You could always move in with me.”

Dali laughed uncomfortably before she lifted our joined hands and asked, “Since when do you move at warp speed, Anthony?”

“Navy, remember?”

“I apologize.Navy.”

“I’m not sure you want to hear why I think it’s okay to move so fast,” I admitted.

“Why?”

“Ask me in a couple of weeks after I’ve wined and dined you and made you fall in love with me.”

“You seem very sure of yourself, Navy .”

“It’s like I told you earlier, Dalisay. When something better comes along, you shouldn’t let it pass you by, but in this case, when something you’ve been dreaming about appears in front of you, take her by the hand and invite her to move into your life.”

“You’ve put me completely off balance,” Dali admitted.

“Seeing you standing outside Three Sheets threw me into a tailspin that I haven’t recovered from.”

“I haven’t been to the bar since I got back.”

“I know.”

“The last time I was there was . . .”

“The night before you left, when I came home.”

Dalisay gasped before she whispered, “That was years ago!”

“It was. I haven’t been a monk since then, but I’ve never met another woman who knocked me off my feet.” Dali looked a little afraid as she stared out over the water in silence. I finally asked, “What’s wrong? I hope that being this honest isn’t scaring you.”

“It is, but not in the way you think it might.”

“Then tell me what you’re thinking.”

“Ask me again after you convince me to move in with you,” Dali ordered.

“I’ll do that.”

“You realize this is crazy, don’t you?”

“Possibly, but genius is usually considered crazy until it’s proven right.”

Dali raised an eyebrow before she said, “Or they’re just crazy.”

“In a few years, when we’re happily married with kids running all over the place, I’ll accept your apology and not say I told you so.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“Nope.”

“Are you high?”

“Nope.”

“Hmm.” Dali lifted our still-joined hands and shrugged before she said, “What fun is the crazy train if you’re the only passenger?”

I burst out laughing before I said, “Choo choo!”

Dali was still laughing when she bumped my arm with her shoulder and said, “I’m pretty sure I fell and hit my head, and this is a coma dream, but I’m gonna run with it until the doctors wake me up.”

“I guess we’ll see, huh?”

“I suppose we will.”

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DALI

You are walking on the beach, hand in hand with Clark Anthony Fucking Michaels, Dalisay!

My heart was racing so fast that I was sure Anthony could feel it thrumming in my fingers - which he had entwined with his as we got closer to the water. I used the hold to keep my balance as I slipped my shoes off.

I hated it when Anthony let go of my hand so I could get closer to the water, but I smiled over my shoulder at him when he said, "I wish I had a camera to capture this moment."

I hadn't been lying when I told him I felt like I was having a fever dream and none of this was real.

How could the man I'd been crushing on since kindergarten be saying such things to me?

He mentioned that seeing me after he got home from prison changed the way he felt about me, but that was ten years ago!

Ten!

Was I really supposed to believe that he had been thinking about me all of that time? If he had, then why hadn't he said something sooner? Had he ever told Corrie how he felt?

Surely not. Corrie knew I was infatuated with her brother, and she'd always thought it

would be wonderful if he and I got together.

What if she wasn't sure about that now that we were older?

What if she did know how he felt but hadn't told me because she didn't want him to get hurt?

Not that I'd hurt him. Surely she knew that. Maybe she thought he would hurt me.

I trusted Anthony more than I had ever trusted any man other than my father and brothers.

He had always been a strong and steady presence in Corrie's life and my life, by association.

When he left for basic training, I cried into my pillow, knowing without a shadow of a doubt that he'd find some woman and fall in love and ruin any chance of my dreams coming true.

When he went to prison, I cried with Corrie at the injustice of it all and wished with all my heart that he didn't have to pay for doing what I felt was right.

When I saw him again after all those years, he was more than a sight for sore eyes.

He was my dream man, alive and well in front of me but for just a short time.

I had a plan and wasn't going to let anything get in my way.

I didn't. I excelled. And I never forgot how he looked that day in the parking lot and the shocked smile on his face when he realized that the woman in front of him was me.

I had dreamed of this for almost my entire life, measuring every man I met against Anthony.

Their hair wasn't blond enough, their eyes weren't blue enough, their skin was too pale or too dark.

No one measured up to my dream man, and I was now standing just a few feet away from him, listening to him casually mention all the things I'd ever wanted in life.

It was surreal, and I didn't know whether to pinch myself or roll with it. Ow! Well, that was going to leave a bruise, but I didn't wake up, so I guess rolling with it was the way to go.

I just hoped that the reality of Anthony Michaels lived up to the fantasy.

I took another few steps into the surf, going out far enough to get my knees wet. The water ebbed in and out in the rhythmic and calming way that I'd always loved. I turned around to look at Anthony again.

He was down on one knee, giving Boogie the attention she craved before he pulled his arm back and let the ball fly out over the water. Boogie was shaking with excitement, but that didn't stop her from bounding into the surf and then diving under to get her ball.

When I looked back at Anthony, he was holding his phone. He held it up as he asked, "Can I take a picture of you?"

I nodded before I smiled for the camera, excited that he wanted to preserve this moment. That said good things about his intentions, but I was still terrified that the bubble would burst and this would be over all too soon.

When Anthony put his phone back in his pocket, I turned back toward the sunset and closed my eyes as I relished the sound of the water and Boogie's excited barking as she begged Anthony to throw the ball again.

I didn't need a camera to record this, because I knew it was a moment I'd never forget. It would be playing on repeat in my mind for the rest of my life. This was the first time in months that I felt good about my future - and I had hope now that my future may just include the man of my dreams.

???

"Are you busy tomorrow?"

I laughed before I answered, "Yes, my social calendar is jam-packed."

"Smartass. Would you like to ride over to the bar and see Dad?"

"I'd love that!"

"The contractors will be working, so we won't stay long."

Without thinking, I asked, "Would you be willing to go car shopping with me?"

"Sure," Anthony said easily. "If you don't mind waking up early, I'll get Dad to go to breakfast with us and then we can drop him back at the bar once we find you some new wheels."

"That sounds great."

"Have you eaten dinner yet?"

“No.”

Anthony took my hand before he said, “May I escort you down to the pier for some fried goodness?”

“I’d love that.”

The walk to the pier was memorable, not because of where we were headed - although I’d missed that too - but because Anthony was holding my hand as we made small talk about the changes that had come about in the area and the incident at the bar that spurred the renovations.

By the time we finished eating, it was fully dark.

We passed the time on the walk back to the condo with more easy conversation.

It felt a lot like a first date but unlike any I’d ever been on before.

There was a comfort in having known Anthony for almost my entire life and our history heightened the excitement of this new adventure.

Once we were in the breezeway at Corrie’s door, I asked, “Would you like to come in for a while?”

Anthony slowly shook his head before he smiled. “Remember when I asked you to call me Navy?”

“Well, yeah,” I chuckled.

“When Corrie’s big brother walks you home, it’s to make sure you get there safely, which you have. That’s great and all, if that’s what you want, and I can play that role.

But as long as that's how you see me, this is where the evening ends."

"It just feels so weird to call you by another name after all this time."

"I'm not the guy you knew back then, Dali."

"I know, and I'm nothing like I was when you knew me."

"Anthony would leave you with a hug and maybe even a kiss on the cheek."

"What would Navy do?"

He crowded me against the door and leaned down to whisper in my ear, his lips so close that I could feel them moving.

"Navy wouldn't kiss your cheek. He'd devour your lips in a kiss that curled your toes and then drink in your whimpers and soft moans like someone who'd been starving for years because that's what I feel like right now - like I've been wandering for years and have finally found the elusive treasure that's going to fulfill me. "

"Wow," I whispered.

"Anthony will respect your space and encourage you from a safe distance, but Navy will crowd you and fill you up before he orders you to scream his name when you come on his cock. That's the difference in who you knew and who I want to be, Dalisay."

Suddenly, Anthony . . . oh, hell no! Navy. The man was Navy now because there was no way I could ever be content with a brotherly hug as he said goodbye.

I wanted that dark voice and the scruff of his short beard on my neck and between my

thighs. After just a few seconds in his arms with that sexy voice in my ear, I'd never see the man the same again.

Corrie's brother had just gone from the man of my girlish dreams to the star of my x-rated thoughts, and I knew that dreaming of him wouldn't be enough anymore.

"I'll see you in the morning, Dali," he said as he walked backward toward his door. "Sleep well. We've got a big day tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Navy."

His smile could have lit up a room as he leaned against his door frame and said, "Night, sweetheart. Dream of me."

I boldly said, "If you'd come inside, I could do more than just dream."

"I can't wait."

D ALI

It took me forever to go to sleep, and I was up before the sun, excited about the day ahead. I'd gone over what happened last night again and again, and I was still just as bewildered and excited as I'd been when I was on the beach with Navy .

I was beginning to understand his insistence that I call him by his nickname. It took away the girlish expectations that I'd always had about having Anthony in my life and made me excited about the prospect of exploring a relationship with a man I didn't really know at all.

I honestly didn't know Anthony that well.

I'd gotten the occasional update from his sister, but that didn't give me any real insight into who he had become.

He'd had so many experiences over the years as he'd grown into a completely different man than the boy I once knew.

I wanted to learn about his time in prison and the life he'd lived while I'd been away from California.

I knew that he made a good living working with computers, but I didn't have a clue in what aspect.

Was he a tech guy who walked people through fixing their own machines, did he create programs for other people to use, or was it something completely different?

I couldn't wait to hear him talk about what Corrie said was a lucrative business that allowed him to live what seemed like a carefree life.

His career really excited her because she still carried a lot of guilt about how the choices she made as a young girl had changed the course of his life in such a horrible way.

Anthony had always been protective of Corrie and me, by association. Since he was eight years older than us, he always seemed larger than life. Compared to us, he was big and strong - and we followed him around endlessly and drove him nuts.

Even though he got irritated with us, he was always kind and understanding.

He encouraged us to ditch our training wheels and taught us how to ride our bikes without them.

He even taught us how to skateboard and roller skate.

Any time either of us fell, he was right there to pick us up and tend to our injuries before he encouraged us to try again.

When I was nine and the neighborhood bully picked on me because of my looks and heritage, calling me names and making me cry, Anthony stood up to him for me and even bloodied his nose when he refused to stop.

When the fight was over and the bully had been vanquished, Anthony wiped away my tears and told me I should be proud of my long black hair and my brown skin because that's what made me special.

He insisted that the differences in mine and Corrie's appearance went together perfectly - like peanut butter and jelly.

He explained that even though both things were good by themselves, they were even better together.

Since then, every time I made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, I thought of Anthony and how special he'd always made me feel.

Corrie adored her older brother, but from day one I was head over heels in love with Clark Anthony Michaels.

He was the person I measured all others against. I was heartbroken when he went into the Navy and beside myself with joy when he came home to start college.

But all too soon, he was gone again . . .

this time to prison which left all of us crushed and worried.

After thinking things over for most of the night, I understood why Anthony insisted that I call him by another name.

Anthony was the person I'd built up in my head as the ideal man - so perfect and protective that he was all but untouchable.

He could do no wrong, was always there on the sidelines, and ultimately was the perfect man.

Navy was a new entity that I didn't have a sweet history with.

He had an edge that seemed a little wild and dangerous and a glint in his eyes that I couldn't figure out.

He looked at me like the big bad wolf might look at his next meal, and I found that so

sexy that I was more than willing to let him eat me up.

I couldn't wait for that to happen.

Living in uniform for ten years made my fashion choices scarce, so it didn't take me long to choose what to wear today. I added clothes shopping to my mental to-do list as I slipped on my sandals and hurried into the bathroom to figure out what to do with my hair.

I had inherited my skin tone, hair color, and body shape from my Filipino mother, but my thick black tresses were as stick straight as my father's light brown hair.

I silently cursed his white genes every time I thought of my mom's flowing, wavy mane.

I'd worn mine slicked back in a bun while I was in uniform, and I really didn't know how to style it any other way.

I figured that was something Antonia and Corrie could teach me.

For now, I pulled it into a French braid and left it alone.

A few swipes of mascara and some tinted lip balm completed my makeup routine - that was something else I should probably ask for help with, but that was for another day.

Dolling myself up to go car shopping was not something I would normally do, but I decided to take a little more care since I was going to be hanging out with Navy. We hadn't set a specific time for him to come over, and I wanted to be ready as soon as he knocked on the door.

I checked the time and decided I didn't want to wait any longer. I threw open the front door only to find him standing there with his hand in the air, preparing to knock.

I yelped, and he took a quick step back before we both started laughing. As he pulled me into his arms for a hug, I thought about how wonderful it felt to be there. It was right where I belonged.

"Good morning to you!" Navy said as he pulled away to smile at me. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"I wasn't sure when to expect you, so I was coming to knock on your door."

"In that case, let's go!"

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NAVY

"Little Dali, you get more beautiful every time I see you."

"I think you may be even more handsome than the last time I saw you, Clark. I never would have thought that was possible."

It took everything I had not to roll my eyes at their innocent flirting, but I couldn't keep myself from laughing when Dad answered, "I attribute my good looks to clean living and a balanced temperament." Dad glared at me before he said, "It's true. You should take note."

I ignored his reply and asked, "Are you going to let us take you out to breakfast or not, old man?"

“As much as I hate to miss an opportunity to have you pay for my meal, I can’t leave right now.

I’m waiting on the county inspector to come by and give me an all clear on the renovations.

However, I told Rafael that you were coming by with Dali, and he went straight to the kitchen and got breakfast started in her honor. ”

I looked at Dali and asked, “Is it okay if we eat here instead?”

“Of course! You know I’ve always loved it here. I’ve missed this place,” Dali said as she looked around the bar. “I have to admit that the changes took me by surprise.”

“We had some problems recently that moved up the timeline of our renovations.”

“What happened?”

While Dad told Dali about the attack, I looked around and saw that everything was ready for Three Sheets to open again and smiled when I thought of how happy the regulars would be to have their second home back.

Quite a few of them had come by and pitched in where they could, probably just to get out of the house and socialize, but their help was welcomed as was the company.

I thought about the email I’d received from Ajax this morning.

He’d been a few days late getting into the investigation, but as soon as he finished the job he was working on, he sunk his teeth in it and got started.

With the help of my friends Preacher, Hammer, and Ajax, we’d all but solved the

mystery of the attackers' identities.

All we needed were a few more strings to tie them together, and then I'd be on the hunt to make them pay for what they'd done - not just to the bar and the men I knew, but to the others at businesses up and down the street.

I considered Ajax's suggestion to call some of my club brothers to come help me out, but I hated to pull them away from their own lives.

Seeking revenge wasn't something I needed help with, considering I had my own system of retribution that I'd been honing for years.

I also didn't want to suck any of my friends into breaking the law and risk getting arrested.

I knew that if I put the word out, I could have men heading my direction from all over the country, including from Texas, where Preacher and Hammer were excitedly planning what they wanted to do to the assholes that hurt my father.

If I found that things were more than I could handle once I got started, I wouldn't hesitate to make the call.

Until then, I'd make plans to get revenge alone.

I watched Dad and Dali walk around the room while he gave her updates on some of the new things he'd added.

Dali squealed when she saw pictures that she remembered from spending so much time here years ago.

I smiled when she reached up and ran her fingers over the glass covering the photo of

Mom and Dad embracing behind the bar and then another of Mom and Corrie dressed up for Halloween as they served customers.

Three Sheets had been opened by my grandfather, and Mom had been raised here just like me and Corrie.

When Grandpa died, Mom took over the business just like Corrie and I would someday when Dad finally decided to hang it up.

I had a million memories in this building, from childhood birthdays to bar brawls and everything in between.

Antonia had spent much of her youth here, and Audie had even taken her first steps here, walking from James to my dad.

The fact that those assholes came in and wrecked the place pissed me off, and the knowledge that they had injured my dad in the process made me livid, but the thought of them storming into a place I considered home sent me into a tailspin of plans to seek revenge.

“Breakfast is served!” Rafael called out as he came through the swinging doors with a large tray of food.

“Rafael! It’s so good to see you!” He beamed at Dali as he set the tray on a nearby table and laughed as he pulled her into his arms. “Did you remember to make my favorite?”

“How could I forget? I could never stand to see you pout.”

“I’ve been all over the world in the last ten years and still haven’t found pancakes as good as yours.”

“Because there are none,” Rafael boasted as he let Dali go and nudged her toward a seat at the table. “Now, tell us all about your travels while we eat.”

Dali danced in her chair when Rafael put a plate of pancakes in front of her.

They weren’t just plain buttermilk pancakes.

He had slathered peanut butter between each one, just like she liked them.

When he handed her a container of honey shaped like a bear just like the one my parents and Rafael had always kept on hand for her when she was a kid, she gasped and danced a little more before she dove into her food as if she hadn’t eaten in days.

Dad caught me watching her and winked before he turned his attention back to Dali and Rafael’s conversation. I stayed where I was and observed their interactions as I studied the woman I’d been dreaming about all these years.

Dali looked so much like her mother had when we’d first met their family that it was almost uncanny. With her hair pulled back from her face, it gave me a better opportunity to study her profile - something I’d never had the chance to do before.

She wasn’t a classic beauty by Hollywood standards since she wasn’t tall and thin with a big bust and flat stomach, but she was beautiful to me.

She was much shorter than me and always had been.

Her petite stature was something that she’d complained about since Corrie hit a growth spurt at ten and left Dali inches shorter than her.

Her brown skin looked sunkissed even though she hadn’t been here long.

I knew that it would get darker as the summer went on.

I wondered if she had been out on the water yet and could have kicked myself for not asking her last night as we walked along the beach. Since she'd been gone so long, she probably didn't have a board anymore. I would take her to find one when we finished car shopping.

I could handle looking for the perfect board and could spend hours perusing the surf shops in the area, but I wasn't looking forward to cruising the car dealerships and dealing with pushy salesmen trying to make money while fucking their customer out of theirs.

As sexist as it may be, I was glad that she'd asked me to accompany her.

I didn't want some slimeball to think he could take advantage of her easy smile.

Little did they know there was an incredibly smart woman behind that smile who was always thinking two steps ahead.

When she was a kid, she was quiet and demure, always very respectful of her elders and their rules, but when the grown-ups weren't around, that wicked kid concocted some crazy plans and always had the guts to follow through with them.

That always drove me nuts, but now that she was an adult, it would probably be much more entertaining. I couldn't wait to see her in action.

N AVY

“Let me make myself perfectly clear, sir . My tits aren’t interested in purchasing a vehicle. Therefore, staring at them while you talk to me isn’t doing a damn thing for your sales quota. Eyes up here!”

The salesman’s eyes shot up to Dali’s and then over to me as he seemed to suddenly remember that she wasn’t alone.

“Oh! Excuse me,” the smarmy asshole said before he gave her a forced smile. “There was an insect on your shirt, but it flew off just as I was about to tell you it was there.”

Dali let out a loud sigh before she looked at me and said, “I’d rather go on a picnic with the Donner Party than buy a car from this asshole. I’m ready when you are.”

I barked out a laugh before I took her hand to walk out to my truck. We were only a few steps away from the sputtering salesman when I asked, “Want me to kick his ass for you?”

“I could kick his ass myself, but the thought of you going caveman . . . If I say yes, will you pick him up and throw him over that truck? It was cool when you did that to the jerk at the bar.”

I glanced over my shoulder and found the salesman watching us with wide eyes and said, “He’s probably small enough to make it over two trucks if I try really hard.”

Dali stopped and turned around to glare at the salesman before she made it a point to

look directly at his crotch. She huffed and then laughed bitterly before she looked back to his face and said, “Unimpressive, I’m sure.”

I had to turn around so the man couldn’t see me biting my lip to stifle a laugh. Dali must have noticed because she grabbed my hand again and tugged me away, muttering under her breath the whole time.

Once we were in the truck, I asked, “Are you sure you don’t want me to go back and rough him up a little?”

“It’s completely normal, even expected, for people to check out one another when they first meet .

. . do a head-to-toe scan, assess threats, and maybe take a second to appreciate what’s in front of you.

That’s human nature. But when they do this .

. .” Dali twisted her body and pushed up over the console so that her eyes were just inches from my chest before she said, “That’s out of line, and I refuse to put up with it.

” She started to move back toward her seat as she said, “I may be small, but my attitude and temper are not.”

Instead of letting her get settled, I hooked my hands underneath her arms and pulled her across the console until she was sprawled over me and resting on my left arm.

There wasn’t a lot of room between me and the steering wheel, but as Dali had just mentioned, she was a petite woman, and she fit just perfectly.

“I like that you’ve got snark and sass, and I also like that I can pick you up and put you where I want you.”

Dali smiled as she rested her hand on the side of my neck. She looked at me expectantly before she asked, “Are you gonna kiss me or not?”

“Do I have to do all the work?”

Dali giggled and then used her grip on my neck to pull herself up until her lips met mine. By the time she relaxed against my arm, we were both out of breath, and I was so turned on that my dick could pound nails. I knew she felt it on her hip when she smiled and asked, “You know what’s great?”

“Everything that happened in the last three minutes?”

Dali grinned before she said, “I’ve always hated how small I am and appreciated how big and strong you are in comparison. Now that I think of that in terms of . . . other things, I think our differences are going to make things very fun.”

I groaned as I let my head fall forward. Dali laughed again before she said, “How is your upper arm strength, Navy? Because I think if you stood and I hopped up into your arms and held on with my legs, you could . . .”

“Spontaneously combust right here in the parking lot?” I interrupted.

Dali squirmed against my cock before she said, “Or we could give them a show.”

I made an explosion noise before I leaned my head back against the headrest and said, “It’s probably illegal to drive with an erection like this since I’m almost positive there’s no blood going to my brain right now.”

Dali tried to sit up but struggled, so I helped her over the console before I reached down and readjusted my cock to a more comfortable position behind my zipper.

When I groaned again, she laughed and said, “Just so you know, you’re gonna have to take me on an official date before I give you so much as a glimpse of the good stuff. ”

“I’d expect nothing less.”

“Good,” Dali said primly as she fastened her seatbelt. “Now, let’s go find me a damn car.”

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Dad watched us walking toward him before he asked, “No luck today?”

“I met three car salesmen that all but refused to answer my questions because they were too busy sucking up to Anthony. Two of those three as well as two others couldn’t stop staring at my boobs, while another one tried to sell me a used car that ‘just needed a new carburetor to make it run like a dream.’”

“What kind of car were you looking at?”

“That was a five-year-old Jeep.”

Dad barked out a laugh before he asked, “Did he think that really had a carburetor, or did he think you would?”

“Both,” Dali grumbled before she said, “Screw it. I’m just going to buy a skateboard. At least I won’t have to pay for parking that way.”

Changing the subject, I asked, “How did the inspection go?”

“Just fine. We’re all set to open tomorrow.”

“That’s great! Did you let Karlie know?”

“I thought I’d let you make the calls while I sit here and talk to this pretty lady.”

I leaned down and kissed Dali on the cheek before I said, “Don’t let him trick you into trading me in for him. The newer model is always better.”

“There’s something to be said for age and experience,” Dali retorted before she turned and gave me a peck on the lips. “Now, run along while I complain to your dad about sexist car salesmen.”

“I hate to miss that, but I really should get to work,” I said over my shoulder as I made my way toward the office.

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DALI

I couldn’t take my eyes off of Clark’s hand as he told me about the improvements they’d made to Three Sheets over the last few days. The way he rubbed the pale circle on his finger where his ring used to be was heartbreaking.

I finally had to ask, “Did you lose your wedding ring?”

“Those fuckers stole it from me,” Clark said angrily. “There wasn’t a goddamn thing I could do but sit there and watch him slip it on his finger.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I said softly as I reached over and put my hand on top of his.

Before Clark could respond, the door opened, blinding us with bright sunshine for a few seconds until it shut again. “Sorry, gentlemen. We’re not open for business until tomorrow.”

The three men kept walking toward the table where we were sitting. The one in front was impeccably dressed, and it was easy to see that he was in charge by the way he handled himself.

“It’s business I’d like to talk about,” the man said as he helped himself to a seat at our table. He looked around before he said, “I heard you had some trouble recently.”

“Where did you hear that?” Clark asked angrily.

“Word gets around.”

“And what business is it of yours?”

“I’m here to offer you some help to make sure nothing like that happens again.”

Clark’s hand fisted beneath mine, so I squeezed it before I cleared my throat and measured my tone to sound meek and unassuming.

“That’s so generous of you, sir! I don’t want anything like that to happen again.

I was so scared when I found out we’d been robbed and the police didn’t have any leads. ”

“And they’re not going to,” the man said dismissively, never even looking my way.

I smiled hesitantly at the goons standing behind their boss's chair. A brief once-over gave me key details that I knew the police would be able to use to help identify the men, including specifics about their hand tattoos.

Clark was still tense as he leaned back in his chair and eyed the man across from him as he asked, "And what exactly is the price for this protection you're offering?"

"Not much at all. We're neighbors and should watch out for each other."

"How much?"

"Twenty percent of the daily take and access to your building when necessary."

Clark scoffed. "And if I tell you to take your offer and shove it up your ass?"

"Well, I would guess that your business and maybe even your home would become a target for the same unsavory characters once they find out you're unprotected."

"Can I get you a drink?" I asked quietly as I stood up.

"We should toast to our agreement."

"I didn't agree to anything," Clark snapped.

"Tequila," the man ordered before he gave Clark a half-smile. "It seems I may need something to take the edge off while I talk some sense into Mr. Andrews."

"Are you hitting up every business you had your boys rob?" Clark asked.

"Now, why in the world would you think my men would do such a thing?"

“Who the fuck are you?” I heard Clark ask as I walked away.

“My friends call me Diablo.”

“I’m not your fucking friend.”

I listened to the men talking, their voices barely civil as Clark tried to hold his temper in check. I pretended to look around, just in case the other men were watching, and then put my hands up and let them drop before I went through the swinging doors that led into the kitchen.

The second the doors closed behind me, I turned to the left and made sure no one could see me moving around from the bar area before I reached up and grabbed two slim knives off the magnetic strip on the wall.

I knew from experience that Rafael kept them razor sharp, so I was careful when I slipped them into the waistband of my shorts and then darted toward the office at the back of the kitchen.

I skidded around the corner and bumped into the wall before I hurried into the office where Rafael was talking to Navy.

“There are three men out front. Two of them are armed and the third one may be too. Two of the men have tattoos on their hands. They’re trying to shake Clark down for protection.

” There was a moment of stunned silence as they stared at me in shock before I rushed to say, “They don’t know you’re back here, and they think I’m as weak as a kitten.

Stay put as backup, and let me go back out to your dad. ”

“Fuck that,” Rafael said as he veered toward the safe.

“Rafael, take the trash out and check for scouts. Get the make, model, and plate of whatever they’re driving. Maybe pretend you're crippled so no one sees you as a threat.”

“Fuck!” Rafael growled before he walked out into the kitchen.

“Are the cameras on?”

“Yes,” Navy said as he walked back around the desk and touched the mouse. The monitor lit up, and I saw that there were at least nine camera angles both inside and outside the bar.

“I’m going back out,” I told him as I turned to leave.

“Dali . . .”

“Don’t even think about telling me to stay here, Anthony,” I snapped as I walked off. “Keep your eyes on the cameras and come in with guns blazing if necessary. I’ll cover Clark until then.”

“Dali!”

I pulled open the refrigerator and grabbed a lime before I took an innocent-looking paring knife off the wall.

I schooled my expression and tried to regulate my breathing as I walked through the swinging doors but jumped when I found one of the men standing next to them.

I gave him a timid smile before I held up the fruit and said, “I haven’t had to slice a

lime in almost a week now! ”

The man never looked at my face - he was too busy leering at me, his eyes never coming up farther than my chest. I wanted to stab him just for that alone, but I managed to resist and started making the drink the pompous ass had ordered.

I slid the shot glass of tequila, complete with a salted rim and a slice of fresh lime, in front of him, but he didn't say a word. He just kept staring at Clark while Clark glared at him.

“I'm generous enough to give you a few days to consider my offer, Mr. Andrews.” The man took the shot and then gently set it on the table. “I understand this bar has been in your family for a while now. It belonged to your wife, correct?”

“Get the fuck out,” Clark hissed.

“You're opening tomorrow, so I'll give you a week to come up with your first payment.”

“And if I don't?”

The man stood up before he shrugged. “That would be very upsetting to me but even more upsetting for you, I'm sure.”

“I guess we'll fucking see, won't we?”

I watched the man turn and walk out of the bar as if he didn't have a care in the world, and his two goons followed closely behind. The second the door closed after them, I sprinted across the bar and slowly turned the deadbolt, hoping that they couldn't hear it lock from outside.

By the time I turned to go back to the table, Navy and Rafael were walking out from the kitchen where I assumed they'd been watching and listening to the video feed.

"What. The. Fuck?" I asked angrily.

"The robbery and attack was first, and then came the shakedown," Navy answered.

"What's the next step?" I asked.

Navy smiled, but it wasn't the cheerful, easygoing smile I'd always known him to pass out so freely. No, this smile was cunning and predatory. His jaw tightened before he growled, "We call in reinforcements and kill every fucking one of them."

N AVY

“I know you’re only supposed to be gone another week, but I may need more time.”

James nodded and then looked over his shoulder at the passengers behind him before he said, “You know she’s gonna kill both of us if she finds out we’re plotting behind her back.”

“That’s a risk we’re going to have to take because you and I both know that if she’s here, she’ll jump in with guns blazing, and neither of us are willing to sit by and watch that happen.”

“And this way, the kids won’t be anywhere close by either,” James mused. I could tell by the look on his face that he was running through options in his head. He smiled brightly before he said, “Hawaii!”

“What?”

“She loved our vacation in Hawaii and still talks about it all the time. I’ll arrange for us to take a cruise there after we disembark from this one.”

“She’s gonna kill you.”

“Maybe not. There’s so much for all of us to do on this ship that they’re nowhere near ready to go home, so I’ll just extend our trip.”

“She’s still gonna kill you when she finds out.”

“I’d rather risk her anger than have her in the middle of something dangerous.”

“Me too.”

“That’s settled then. I’ll take care of it and stay in touch with you so I’ll know when it’s safe to come home.”

“That sounds like a plan. I’m going to make some calls to get some of my club brothers to join me on this little escapade.”

James laughed before he said, “It’s not like you’ll have to twist their arms. Once you tell them what’s going on, the guys I’ve met will show up with a smile on their face and murder in their eyes.”

“Just like I’d do for them.”

“You’ll have to be careful not to let Clark or Rafael go rogue. Try and keep those old codgers on a leash so they don’t get injured any further.”

“That’s easier said than done,” I told him with a laugh. “Although, I’d rather have that task than have to be the one to explain to my sister why you’ve suddenly decided to embrace a month-long vacation.”

“You think it will take a month?” James asked.

“For you to recover? I’d say at least six. Maybe more.”

“You’ve got that right. Okay, let’s reassess after a couple of weeks.”

“Sounds good. I’ll be in touch.”

James ended the video call, and I scrolled through my contacts until I found who I was looking for. When he answered, I said, “I need some help.”

Twenty minutes later, I had finished the majority of my calls and was even angrier than I’d been before. I tried to calm myself down as I waited to hear that my friends had connected and were ready for me to give them the details of today’s situation.

The phone vibrated with an incoming call. I set it aside and answered the video call on my laptop.

Within seconds, Ajax, Preacher, Hammer, and, surprisingly, our club president, Boss, appeared on my screen.

There wasn’t any time for greetings, because Boss jumped right in and asked, “Why the fuck does this guy think he can shake you down for money? Fuck him! That’s a good way to find yourself dead!”

It was funny to see a man wearing a badge talk about killing people, but I wasn’t surprised. Boss had always been an imposing man and was adamant about taking care of the people he considered family. Luckily, my father fell into that category as did I.

“My guess is that there’s going to be a couple of store owners who cave but a few others who report this shit to the law, as if they’d do anything about it,” Ajax grumbled.

“Why would they since they’re probably in on it?” Preacher asked, his penchant for conspiracy theories evident in his tone. “You’re on your own until the guys get to you. I won’t be there, but men are coming.”

“You won’t even come to California for little old me?” Preacher gave me a flat stare, and I chuckled before I said, “That’s okay, friend. I understand.”

“I know you’ve talked to some of the Nomads, and I put the word out to a few more,” Ajax informed me.

Boss was the president of our MC, and Ajax had become the unofficial spokesperson for the Time Served Nomads because he had the most contact with all of us through the jobs he occasionally hired us to do.

“Chewie was packing up when I talked to him. He’s waiting for Oz so they can ride together.” Boss cleared his throat before he said, “I didn’t call Dice because he’s got a baby now.”

“Understood,” I replied with a nod. “Thanks, guys.”

“And you know the creeper is going to appear out of nowhere,” Preacher said with an exaggerated shudder. “He’s just not normal.”

Hammer chuckled before he mumbled, “Pussy.”

Ajax was laughing when he changed the subject, probably to stop Hammer and Preacher from going after each other. “There are a couple more on their way to you, but I’m not sure when they’ll get there.”

“I’ve got plenty of space for everyone. I’d like to get a couple of men to watch the bar from the inside and out. I’ll also need someone to stick close to my dad when I’m not around.”

“I’ll be there tomorrow,” Ajax said as he stared at his computer. After a few seconds, he said, “My flight gets there tomorrow evening. I’ll get a car and have a look around before I come to your place.”

“Are you going to put a hold on your extracurricular activities?” Hammer asked.

“I hate to, but I probably should. I wouldn’t be able to focus with all of this other shit I have going on.”

“Are you going to make the one tonight?”

“Yeah. It’s already in motion and on schedule,” I assured him.

“Gotcha,” Preacher said as he nodded and started typing.

“We could have Lurk take over for a while,” Boss suggested. I watched Preacher shudder again, and then Boss shook his head and recanted. “Nevermind. He’s got a flair for the dramatic, so . . .”

“Dramatic? The man bathes in human blood to look younger than all of us!”

“He is younger than all of us,” Ajax reminded Preacher. He looked confused for a second before he asked, “Isn’t he?”

“I don’t think anyone knows,” Boss said with his brows furrowed. “Anyway, do what you can, and when your support gets there, they’ll help you take care of the rest.”

“Until then, we’ll keep an eye on things and fish for more information.”

Knowing how much it would irritate him, Hammer started singing, “ You and me go fishin’ in the dark, lyin’ on our backs . . .”

“I will blow up your fucking house,” Preacher yelled before his image disappeared from the screen.

I couldn’t help but laugh when Hammer giggled and waved before he said, “Toodeloo!”

“I swear to God, if I didn’t like them so much, I’d hate their fucking guts,” Boss grumbled. “It’s like having children who are too big to beat.”

“Tasers might help,” Ajax suggested.

“That’s how I used to get you to shut up,” Boss said thoughtfully. “I may have to try that.”

“Paintballs are also a good option, and they hurt even worse if you freeze them first.”

“Can’t do it, Navy,” Boss said as he slowly shook his head. “I’ll have Blue and Pita all over my ass for hurting their men. They’ll end up getting Jenn involved in the fray, and I’ll have to sleep in the barn with the animals until I apologize.”

“Aww, Boss. You have such a hard life,” Ajax said sarcastically.

“Piss off.”

“On that note, I’m gonna go so I can get some things done before my date tonight and the adventure I have planned.”

“Get plenty of rest and make sure to glove up,” Ajax suggested.

Boss burst out laughing before he said, “That advice can go either direction.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle as I shook my head at the men who I looked up to but could make me crazy in seconds. “I’ll talk to you guys soon.”

“Bye, kid. Bye, asshole,” Boss said before he disconnected, leaving only me and Ajax on the call.

“Any chance you can put off your adventure until I get there?”

I thought about it for a second before I said, “I can’t put off the one I have planned for tonight, but I’ve got two more in the works that you can take if you want or come with me if you’d rather I take the lead.”

“I’ll let you know,” Ajax replied. “Be safe.”

“You too. See you soon.”

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DALI

I knew Anthony . . . No, Dali! He’s Navy now, remember? . . . wouldn’t want me walking alone, but I needed to do this by myself, so I left through the back door while Rafael and Clark were distracted by a delivery man.

Even after years in the Navy, I still wasn’t very good at taking orders, especially when they didn’t make sense. The difference between then and now was that I did what my superiors told me to do unless I was in some sort of real danger. Then I wasn’t about to listen to anyone bark orders at me.

Not that Navy or his dad would ever do that. No, their orders would be posed as a suggestion for my own good or maybe even a declaration because they thought they knew what was best.

“Fuck that,” I said under my breath as I stepped on the curb and looked at the building in front of me.

Just a few blocks down from Three Sheets was another family-owned business that

had been here for ages - except this one hadn't just raised one family, it had supported half a dozen.

When my grandparents came to the US from the Philippines, they didn't have much of anything other than determination and a strong work ethic.

They both worked their asses off to support their six children and, in time, opened a multitude of businesses, including the car wash on the corner lot a few blocks away from Three Sheets.

As soon as I heard about the attack at the bar, I wondered if my extended family also got a visit from the thugs the police still hadn't managed to apprehend.

I now knew that was that case. The building had two boarded-up windows and a sign that read, "Closed for renovations, but re-opening soon!" .

Those motherfuckers had attacked not just the family I'd come to love but my own family too.

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As I got closer to the building, my sense of pride in the place almost overwhelmed me.

Other lots had cracks and weeds with trash scattered around.

This lot was pristine. Any cracks in the pavement had been repaired, and the only vegetation on the property was the beautiful plants in the large pots at the corners of the building and beside the front doors.

I was surprised to find the door unlocked and walked in expecting to see one of my cousins inside but found two of my aunts instead. They were shocked to see me, and greeted me in their native language, one I was comfortable speaking since that was still how I communicated with my mom.

My oldest aunt rushed around the counter and embraced me. When she let me go, I said, “Mano po,” and took her right hand as I leaned forward and touched it to my forehead.

Aunt Amihan beamed and then nudged me toward Aunt Ligaya, who I greeted the same way.

In Tagalog, I asked, “What happened to the windows? Why are you closed?”

Aunt Amihan shook her head before she said, “Unpleasant behavior.”

I studied her face and saw that the area around her left eye was swollen. I frowned and asked, “Who else was injured?”

Aunt Ligaya's eyes filled with tears, and she whispered, "Your uncle is in the hospital."

I gasped before I asked, "Will he be okay?"

There were four siblings left in my mother's family - my mom, Aunt Ligaya, Aunt Amihan, and Uncle Bayani.

Aunt Ligaya and her husband ran the car wash with their sons, Michael, Christopher, and Agustin, until they went off to college. All three had become doctors, gotten married, and had children of their own.

Like my mother, Aunt Amihan had also married a white man.

She and their two boys traveled with him to various bases during his time in the service.

Sammy and Ricky followed in their dad's footsteps and enlisted in the Marines where they were still serving today.

When Uncle Leo died of cancer a few years ago, Aunt Amihan moved back to Oceanside to live with Aunt Ligaya, who was already a widow herself.

Uncle Bayani, the youngest of my mom's siblings, owned a small chain of successful Filipino grocery stores along the coast, one of which was just up the street. Apparently, the wannabe gangsters had attacked his store along with the car wash.

"Bayani will be fine, but it may take some time."

"Who is running the store?" I asked Aunt Amihan.

“Nathan was out of town during the attack, but he rushed home as soon as he heard,” she explained. “He’s almost finished with the repairs there, and then he’ll help us with ours.”

“Where is Jodie?”

“She came home yesterday. She’s working with Nathan now.”

Jodie was Uncle Bayani’s oldest child and the only other female in my generation of the maternal side of the family.

She’d been wild when we were young but had calmed down considerably after she was arrested and served time in prison for killing her abusive husband.

I personally thought that was something she should have been given an award for.

The judge and jury disagreed because of what they considered aggravated circumstances.

They thought her sewing him up in a bed sheet and beating him to death with his own bat was a little too extreme to be deemed self-defense.

Everyone else in my family also hailed her as a hero. We had no idea that she’d been the victim of his abuse for years, but when he raised his hand to their daughter, she put an end to his bullshit. Permanently.

“What can I do to help?” I asked.

Aunt Amihan shook her head as she looked around the pristine office. Her gaze landed on the plywood-covered window as her forehead puckered, but then she smiled and said, “We have everything taken care of here, but your cousins could use

your help.”

“Has a man come by and asked for money in exchange for protection?” I asked. My aunts instantly nodded in unison. “Have you told Nathan?”

“He got a visit too.”

“How angry is he?” I asked.

Aunt Ligaya chuckled before she said, “Almost as much as Jodie.”

I could only imagine how Jodie was handling this.

After years in an abusive marriage, she had made the choice to change her entire life and was a total badass now.

As children, we’d been trained to fight by Jodie’s father who had learned a martial art called Kali in the Philippines, which utilizes weapons and defensive tactics.

After prison, Jodie immersed herself in the practice for self-protection, whereas I used the skill for physical fitness.

“I’m here permanently, so I’ll see you often,” I assured them before I hugged them goodbye. “Please call me if there’s anything I can do to help.”

When I got outside, I walked up the street toward the store, hoping my aunts had exaggerated the damage.

However, I knew they hadn’t as soon as I caught sight of the boards on the windows - and not just two, but all of them.

Worse than that, I saw stains on the concrete near the front door that looked like blood.

“Shit,” I whispered as I tried the door. When it didn’t open, I leaned forward and cupped my hands around my eyes so I could see through the glass and saw that the store was empty. I rapped my knuckles on the door and was glad to see my cousin, Nathan, hurrying my way.

He unlocked the door and pushed it open. The second I was close enough, he wrapped his arms around me and picked me up to spin me around as he’d done a million times over the years. I was happy that it didn’t hurt at all, which wouldn’t have been the case even a few weeks ago.

“Cousin!” Nathan said cheerfully as he set me on my feet. He yelled for his sister over his shoulder, and Jodie appeared seconds later. She pulled me into her arms for a less exuberant hug and asked, “When did you get home?”

“I’ve only been here a few days.”

“Where are you staying?” she asked.

“I planned on getting an Airbnb, but Corrie and her family just left for vacation and offered to let me stay at their place.”

“And why didn’t you call us?” Jodie asked. Her forwardness had always irritated the elders in our family, but I appreciated it. However, I appreciated it a little more when it wasn’t aimed at me. Before I could answer her, she hummed and said, “Because we don’t have a condo on the beach.”

“Whatever, hag. Maybe I didn’t call because I knew you’d be busting my balls every chance you got.”

“I would say that women don’t have balls, but I know both of you, and I think they’re hiding in there somewhere.”

Without missing a beat, Jodie slowly turned her head and gave her brother a menacing stare before she said, “The last pair I got is still in my purse.”

“I keep mine displayed in jars on a shelf in my basement,” I lied.

Nathan swallowed hard before he said, “Great to see you, Dali.” He looked around anxiously before he added, “I’ve got to . . . do something in the back.”

We managed to hold it together until we heard the office door shut before we burst out laughing. Jodie threw her arms around me before she said, “I’ve missed you, cousin.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

“Are you going to stay in Oceanside, or will you move upstate to be closer to your parents?”

“I’m planning to stay here.”

“Good. I need all the backup I can get. The aunts are trying to marry me off, and it will finally take some of the heat off of me with you here.”

“Didn’t you tell them you were a lesbian?” I asked.

“I did, but then Aunt Amihan showed up one morning to bring over some lumpia they’d made and found me in bed with a man.”

“Oops.”

“Word of advice - don’t give them a spare key.”

“I’ll keep that in mind once I find a place of my own.”

“Did they tell you about Dad?” When I nodded, Jodie narrowed her eyes and said, “I want so badly to go on a killing spree, but I know I’m outnumbered and outgunned. Besides, the last thing Dad needs right now is to have to worry about me.”

“Did that asshole pay you guys a visit earlier?”

“The smarmy one throwing out veiled threats? Yeah, he did.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll burn this bitch down and roll around in the insurance money before I pay for protection from some thug.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“I don’t know what we’re going to do. He said that he couldn’t guarantee bad things wouldn’t happen if we went to the cops. Nathan and I were talking about it when you got here, and we’re at a loss.”

“Navy . . . Anthony has a plan. I’ll talk to him and see if he could possibly help our family.”

“Navy? That’s his hot biker name, isn’t it?”

“How did you know?” I asked.

“I’ve seen the pictures of him and his friends hanging on the wall at Three Sheets.”

Jodie fanned her face before she said, “Knowing there are men like that out there makes me really glad I’m not a lesbian.”

“He asked me out.”

“He did not !” When I nodded, Jodie pushed at my shoulder and hissed, “Bitch!”

“God, I’ve missed you!” I said before I threw my arms around her for another hug.

“I’m glad you’re back, but I hate that you showed up just in time for this shit show.”

“I’m happy to help in any way I can.”

“If that’s the case, then let’s start restocking the shelves. Those bastards ruined almost all of our stock, and we promised Dad that we’d open up as soon as possible, so we’ve gotta get to work.”

“Tell me what you want me to do.”

D ALI

We'd been working for almost an hour when I heard a knock at the front door. I peeked around the corner of the aisle I was stocking and smiled when I saw Navy peering through the glass.

Jodie was working an aisle closer to the front, so she got to the door before me and unlocked it so Navy could come inside. He looked at her with a smile that most men would reserve for their younger sister before he put an arm over her shoulders and pulled her close.

"Hi, firecracker. Killed anybody lately?"

Jodie wrapped her arm around his waist and said, "Not today. Well, yet."

Navy laughed before he looked up to see me coming closer. The smile he gave me looked nothing like the one he'd given Jodie, and I felt my cheeks flush with a creeping heat at the silent implications that grin had.

As he took his arm off Jodie's shoulder and reached for me, he said, "I was surprised when I came out of the office and realized you'd left."

"I wanted to visit my family, and it was a short walk."

The corners of Navy's mouth turned down as he looked at Jodie and said, "I'm sorry I didn't think to check on your family earlier. Is everyone okay?"

“They roughed up Aunt Amihan, but Dad got the worst of it when he tried to fight back. There were four men, so he was completely outnumbered, but he gave them some bruises to think about.”

“Good. I hope he recovers quickly. Is Nathan here too?”

“Yes. We’re staying at Mom and Dad’s.”

“I assume you had another visit this morning?” Navy asked. When Jodie’s eyes narrowed, he said, “That’s how I feel about the situation.”

“I’m not sure what we can do. They said going to the cops would be useless, and they’re probably right. The police can’t post a guard at every business on the street.”

“I’ve got some friends coming in to help, and I can call more if I need to. We’ll get someone to be with you as soon as we can.”

“Thank you, Anthony,” Jodie said before she pushed me out of the way and hugged him. “When this is over, would you like to run away together?”

“I’m afraid not,” Navy answered as he returned her hug. “I’ve got my sights set on your cousin.”

Jodie shrugged and said, “I could get rid of her if I wanted to.”

“You’re safe, Navy. The aunts are working on finding Jodie a suitable husband.”

Navy started laughing before he said, “Are they going to warn the poor guy or leave him in the dark?”

“It’s not completely dark in the basement,” Jodie muttered as she walked off. “You

two play kissy-face for a minute while I get Nathan. He'll be happy to see you."

Navy pulled me into his arms and kissed me soundly before he frowned and said, "Would it make any difference if I asked you to stay close by while we get this worked out?"

"Depends on how you ask."

"Dali, I know that you are a strong and independent woman who can kick ass and take names, but it would make me feel a lot better if you would do me a favor and not take off on your own until we get this situation under control."

I managed to hold in my laughter and cleared my throat before I said, "I'll have to thank Corrie for working so hard to help you curb your caveman tendencies."

"Is that a yes?" Navy asked hopefully.

"I promise that I won't take off again without telling anyone."

"That's as good as I'm going to get, isn't it?" When I nodded, Navy smiled and said, "I've got some friends coming to town that I can't wait for you to meet."

"Are they staying at your place?"

"A few of them will, and some others will need to bunk at Corrie's. I've called our downstairs tenants, and they've agreed to let me use their condos for the overflow."

"How did you explain that?"

"I told them I was having a family reunion."

“Are these some of your friends from Texas?” I asked.

“That’s where I met most of them, but they all belong to Time Served MC.”

“So they’re all ex-cons?” Navy nodded before I remarked, “I bet they’re some colorful characters.”

“Oh, honey, you have no idea.”

“Are they all as handsome as you?” I asked.

Navy shrugged before he said, “Hell, I don’t know. Why?”

“Give Jodie whichever one is the biggest asshole, or she might make him fall in love.”

“I’ll see what I can do, but if she’s half as awesome as you are, that won’t be hard for her to do.”

“I assume we’re going to have to put off our first date for a while.” Navy frowned, and I said, “It’s not a big deal!”

Navy shook his head before he explained, “Dad and Rafael are going to stick together, so they’re good. I’d still like to take you to dinner tonight.”

“Be honest. You just want to get me into bed.” Navy grinned, so I leaned in and gave him a lingering kiss before I whispered, “I can feed myself, Navy . Let’s skip dinner and go straight to the good part.”

“If we do that, then what are we going to tell our kids when they ask us how I made you fall for me?” I felt my mouth open in shock, and Navy chuckled before he asked,

“Too soon?”

I nodded and mumbled, “Way too soon.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll check in next week to see if you’re ready to start.” He looked around the store, taking in the stacks of boxes before he said, “I guess they’re not exactly open for business, so I need to stop by a pharmacy sometime soon.”

I managed to slow my racing heart so I could speak before I said, “Or you could realize that part of the strong, independent woman thing you’re attracted to in me means I’ve already taken care of birth control, so you should just pick me up and carry me to bed.

” Navy groaned as he closed his eyes and clenched his jaw.

I couldn’t resist throwing his own words at him. “Too soon?”

Navy picked me up bridal style as I let out a squeal of shock. As he turned toward the door, he yelled, “Jodie, we’re outta here! Come lock up!”

“I hate you right now, cousin!” Jodie yelled back from somewhere behind us.

I was laughing too hard to respond.

???

Navy wiped his mouth and took a sip of his beer before he asked, “What injury was your most difficult to get over? I’ve had bruised ribs before, and they hurt like a motherfucker, so I can’t imagine what it feels like to break one.”

“Cracked sternum was probably the worst,” I told him before I shuddered. “It felt like

there was an elephant on my chest, and I couldn't even move my fingers without pain."

"But you're all good now?"

"You're not going to hurt me," I assured him. "It's hard for me to let go after months of being so careful, but something happened that made me realize I'm just fine."

"Like what?"

"My cousin picked me up in a bear hug, and it didn't hurt at all."

"That's good to know," Navy said before he cut another piece of his steak.

"I have an appointment tomorrow to hopefully get a full medical release. Once I do, I'm going to buy a board and get lost in the waves for at least a day."

"That will cure just about anything."

"I missed the beach while I was in the Navy, which sounds crazy because it's the Navy. I was on the water for the majority of my career, but you can't exactly hop over the side of the carrier with your board."

"I remember," Navy said before he sighed. "When I was in prison, I dreamed about surfing."

"I dreamed about you."

Navy smiled. "Really?"

"They were young girl dreams, but you were the star."

“What’s the difference between young girl dreams and woman dreams?”

“Picket fences and nudity.” Navy barked out a laugh and then started coughing and gasping for air. “For the most part, they were G-rated and included a big white house and a nuclear family. As I got older, they became less chaste and more . . . spicy.”

“Spicy. Hmm.” Navy grinned before he asked, “How spicy?”

“They varied from bell pepper to ghost pepper, depending on what was going on in my life.”

“Explain.”

“When I was a kid, it was hero worship. When I was a teenager, I compared every boy I met to you. None of them ever measured up.”

“Because I’m awesome.”

I rolled my eyes before I said, “When I started dating, I kept up the comparisons, but that’s when the hormones really went into overdrive. I compared everything I experienced with boys and then men to what I thought it would be like with you.”

“Damn. Nothing like pressure to make me doubt myself,” Navy replied with a wince. “What if I turn out to be a dud in the bedroom and you regret spending so much time dreaming of me?”

“You said you dreamed of me.”

“I thought of you when I was awake too.”

“Really?” I asked.

Navy nodded before he blushed and admitted, “As a matter of fact, I thought about you in the shower this morning.”

I grinned and suggested, “Keep that in mind and maybe we can recreate it in the shower tomorrow morning.”

“As much as I love that idea and want to take you home to get started on making our dreams come true . . .”

“That was the cheesiest thing I’ve ever heard,” I interrupted.

Navy rolled his eyes and continued, “I have an appointment this evening that I can’t miss. That means that as much as I want to spend the night and then shower with you in the morning, I have to wait one more day to do all the naughty things we’ve both imagined.”

“You sound so . . . businesslike.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Navy asked.

“It’s hot.”

“Hot enough to make up for the cheesy comment?”

“Absolutely.”

“I’ll accept that.”

“What you’re saying is that you’re going to leave me smoldering and not give me any choice in the matter.”

“No! That’s not what I mean at all!”

“That’s what it sounds like.”

“I’m saying that maybe we should stick to naughty dreams until . . .”

“No.”

“No?”

“Unless your previous appointment includes getting naked with another woman, I’ll be more than content to let you leave me sleeping until you finish whatever your business may be.

When you’re done, you can crawl back into bed and wake me up so we can continue what we started and then have shower fun when we wake up tomorrow. ”

“This is not how . . .” Navy looked up at the ceiling for a few seconds and then back at me before he said, “You are nothing like I imagined.”

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“Is that a bad thing?”

“You’ve completely thrown me for a loop, and I think it’s great.”

“I’m not the sweet little girl you remember.”

“Hell no, you’re not.”

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NAVY

“It’s not the right time,” I repeated to myself as I unlocked my front door.

Even though Dali had argued that she didn’t mind that I had to leave shortly, I did, so I was a gentleman and escorted her to Corrie’s door.

I thought I’d give her a chaste kiss or two so neither of us got any more worked up and then promise her that tomorrow was a new day and I’d make it up to her somehow.

Of course, that didn’t work, and before I knew it, I had her in my arms with her legs wrapped around my waist. Kissing her was like a drug. It took every bit of willpower to stop and set her down.

“I’ve got to go, Dali,” I mumbled against her ear as we tried to catch our breath.

“Tomorrow.”

“I don’t like you very much right now.”

“Patience is a virtue, right?”

“Whatever.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“I’m not happy with you, but I understand that you’re trying to be noble and all that bullshit.”

I chuckled as I took a step back and reached out to cup her face with my hands. I leaned down and kissed her one last time before I let go and took another step back. “Go inside, Dalisay.”

Dali narrowed her eyes at me and then turned around to put in the code for Corrie’s door. I smiled when I saw how aggressively she hit the buttons but bit it back when she turned around and glared at me. “I never pegged you for a tease, Navy.”

“And you’re never gonna peg me, but that’s neither here nor there.”

Dalisay burst out laughing and walked inside. Just before the door closed, I called out, “Sweet dreams!”

The door flew open, and she leaned out and flipped me off but laughed before she slammed the door.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” I mumbled as I stepped out of my boots and nudged them up against the wall.

When there was a loud knock, I jumped and then laughed at myself as I opened the

door.

Dali was standing there with a determined expression.

“Hey, gorgeous. Long time, no see,” I quipped. When she just stood there in the doorway staring at me, I asked, “What’s wrong?”

“We’re just getting to know each other . . .” She pointed at me and then back at herself a few times before she said, “As adults.”

“Right.”

“That whole ‘call me Navy’ thing . . .” I chuckled when she mimicked my voice, but she just huffed before she said, “You don’t want me to think of you as Anthony with the big brother vibe, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, maybe I don’t want you to think of me as Dali, the sweet little girl who does what she’s told.”

“Have you ever been that girl?”

“I’m not now, that’s for damn sure.”

“You’re not fond of being told what to do. Noted.”

“Oh, I am, but only in certain circumstances.”

“Is that so?” I asked.

“Now isn’t that time.”

She was so much shorter than me - there was at least a foot difference, and I outweighed her by a hundred pounds, but the girl was a powerhouse.

Those strong legs that I’d been admiring since I found her asleep on the roof burst into action as she launched herself at me.

I had no choice but to catch her when she wrapped her legs around my waist.

When her mouth hit mine, I forgot all about my good intentions and kissed her with all the passion I’d held back when I kissed her at the front door.

When she pulled her mouth away from mine, we were both breathing heavily, but she managed to whisper, “I want to lick every inch of your sexy body and then ride you until we’re hoarse from screaming.”

“Holy shit,” I said as I turned and walked toward my bedroom.

Her ass fit perfectly in my hands, and she was so light that I felt like I could carry her forever. However, if she kept doing that thing on my neck with her teeth, I’d end up bending her over the couch and taking her right here in the living room.

I managed to make it to the bedroom and was about to lay her on the bed when I realized that both dogs were staring at me angrily for interrupting their nap.

“Out!” I yelled in a tone they didn’t hear often but had learned to obey.

“I’ll make it up to you later,” Dali told them as she reached out and shut the bedroom door behind Boogie and Spicoli. She smiled at me before she said, “Now I’ve got you all to myself.”

I set her down again, but this time, I pulled up the dress she was wearing at the same time and threw it to the side as soon as her feet hit the floor. I took a step back to take in the sight before me.

Dali's golden brown skin was on full display. "Were you naked underneath that dress all night?"

"I was."

"Fuck me," I whispered angrily to myself.

"I planned on it, but then you got a case of the prudes."

"You're so fucking gorgeous," I said as I pulled my shirt off over my head. I had her back in my arms in the next second and gently laid her down on the bed before I kissed my way down her throat to her chest. "Do me a favor."

"I'm going to do more than that if you don't kick it into gear."

I chuckled before I twirled my tongue around her nipple but then pulled back to look at her before I said, "Don't ever wear a bra or underwear again."

"I can't agree to that, but I'll make sure to let you know when I'm commando."

I groaned before I pulled her nipple into my mouth as I cupped her other breast with my hand. I teased that nipple at the same time until Dali arched her back.

"I need you to . . . Oh God," Dali said as I began kissing my way down her stomach. "Yeah. I need that."

I took my time, drawing out the anticipation before I finally slid my hands beneath

her ass and lifted her off the bed and toward my mouth. Dali's legs fell to the side, opening her up completely, and I stuck out my tongue to flick it against her clit a few times.

It was like she'd touched a live wire. Her entire body tensed as she slid her hands through my hair and pulled me closer. I hummed my appreciation against her clit as soon as my lips closed around it. I worshiped it with my tongue, flicking it over and over until she writhed against my mouth.

When I pushed a finger inside her, she started moaning, and when I added a second digit, she got louder. I kept pressure on her clit as I tried different positions with my fingers, stroking her gently for a time and then getting more forceful before I started moving them gently again.

I worked her close to orgasm and then slowed repeatedly until she was sobbing my name and begging me to let her come. When she finally did, it was with a primal scream as her entire body shook beneath me.

I rode out her orgasm with her until she tugged on my hair and begged me to stop. I kissed the inside of her thigh before I lifted my head and looked up at her.

"Holy shit. What was that?"

"That was me ruining you for anyone else."

N AVY

“You sorry motherfucker,” I mumbled to myself as I scrolled through the results I’d found during my search of the computer. “You don’t even try to hide what a sick fuck you are.”

When the man in question didn’t make a sound in his own defense, I glanced over and found his eyes glazed over as if he was disassociating from the pain his body was currently experiencing.

I looked back to the computer screen to check the time and found I was right on schedule.

However, I hadn’t had a gorgeous woman waiting for me in my bed when I’d made that schedule.

I took a few seconds to think through the changes I wanted to make and came to the conclusion that rushing things along wouldn’t affect my plan or the outcome.

Unfortunately, it would benefit the man sitting so still and quiet nearby because it would cut short his suffering. A few minutes didn’t really matter, though. In the end, his punishment would still last a lifetime.

I leaned over and twisted the short metal rods four times each, causing the man in the chair to groan loudly. When he started choking on the blood pooling in his mouth, I smiled at him and asked, “Are those too tight?” Of course, he didn’t answer. He didn’t have that ability anymore.

With a shrug, I went back to my work on the computer, opening all the documents, screenshots, and pictures he'd thought were hidden from prying eyes.

When a message popped up in the bottom corner of the screen, I read it before I memorized the username of the sender. It wasn't one I'd found in my research, but it was on my radar now, which meant that someday, hopefully soon, I'd be visiting him with the same purpose I had tonight.

With my quickened timeline, it didn't take long to finish my tasks.

I set up the scene to match the others before I walked toward the door of the disgusting monster's cave.

When I glanced over my shoulder, I found him slumped in the chair where I'd left him.

He was free from all the ties I'd used earlier except for the ones holding his ankles to the legs of the chair.

They'd be easy for him to untie . . . if his hands weren't resting on the keyboard across the room. Of course, he could always call for help, but with his tongue laying beside his hands, that might prove to be difficult.

But without hands to type or touch and without a tongue to form words and threats, he also wouldn't be able to prey on little girls online or trade disgusting images with his scumbag friends.

I could have just killed him, but I believed it was a much more fitting punishment for him to have to live without the ability to communicate in any way other than blinking. At least he was still alive, right? I thought it was the perfect retribution.

Once I was on the road, I rolled the windows down so I could feel the breeze coming off the water.

I felt a hundred pounds lighter without my protective suit, but it always took a little time to get used to breathing fresh air again.

I pulled the tight cap off my head and wondered how people could function wearing one for any length of time.

Once I tossed it aside, I scratched my scalp and relished the cool wind blowing through my hair.

I'd taken every precaution I could think of but couldn't find a way around wearing the stocking cap.

I couldn't risk a stray hair falling - not that I thought the cops were working very hard to analyze every hair or thread they found at the scene.

Once they realized my "crime scene" wasn't nearly as horrible as the one I made sure to pull up on the computer screen every time I made a visit like this, their drive to solve the crime they were originally called for probably dimmed.

It was human nature to hate a scumbag who lived as a predator. It wouldn't be surprising to find out that it lessened the urge to find the person who did what they probably considered a favor to their community and humanity in general.

At least, that's how I felt about it.

I shifted in my seat, hating the limited space of the compact car I'd chosen for tonight.

I detested riding in any car, but it only made sense for this adventure.

A fleet of non-descript vehicles was very important in the grand scheme of things, and I made sure to choose common cars that were a dime a dozen.

Today's Corolla rolled off the assembly line as one of more than three hundred thousand made that year, just like the other mass -produced vehicles I'd collected over the last few years.

The Camrys, Luminas, Civics, and Accords I'd amassed were all very common and non-descript, something that I knew would help me evade detection.

Luckily, the cars were easy to camouflage and change, depending on the situation. Each time one got repainted, I made sure to use a dull color that could be mistaken for something else, especially in the dark.

Even though they were older models, they still got excellent gas mileage. Just in case I ran into a problem, I had two jerry cans full of gasoline in the trunk for emergencies, but I hadn't needed to use them so far.

My late night adventures didn't seem to have a pattern, but they were always well-planned.

What had started out as something to keep my mind occupied in prison had turned into a venture that made me feel like I was making a difference in the world.

While I had been locked up for something I didn't feel like I should have been punished for, I had plenty of time to think through every possible outcome.

Before I put things in motion, I had taken pains to solve any problem that might arise.

Occasionally, I'd get a pang of conscience because my late-night adventures didn't seem to bother me at all.

A shrink would probably have a field day exploring my psyche, but I didn't think a shrink's opinion mattered.

I learned long ago that the law could only do so much, and there were many instances where a person suffered consequences for acts they should have been commended for. I worked very hard to never get recognition, though.

A true hero didn't need thanks. Knowing that he was changing the world a little at a time while making it a safer place for someone's daughter or sister was thanks enough.

???

DALI

I rolled onto my side and nuzzled my face into the pillow, inhaling Navy's fresh, clean scent. The man smelled like sunshine and soap, and that caused me to smile to myself as I inhaled again.

I heard a noise out in the hall and lifted my head as I looked toward the bedroom door.

Boogie was whining, and I heard Spicoli let out a low woof right before a voice I didn't recognize shushed them.

I heard another voice that also didn't belong to Navy and sprang up out of bed, taking care to be quiet as I padded across the floor to find something to wear.

I pulled a shirt off the hanger and then over my head as I scanned the bedroom for something I could use for protection. Obviously, as a felon, Navy didn't own a handgun, but I didn't see anything else I could use either.

I heard footsteps in the hallway and looked over to see the gaps in the light coming from the crack at the bottom of the door. Someone was standing just outside, and I knew I had seconds to figure out how to protect myself.

The tall lamp in the corner would have to do, so I yanked the cord out of the wall before I hefted it up to test its weight balance.

It wasn't the best weapon, but definitely something I could work with, so I rushed over to pin myself against the wall behind the bedroom door.

I put a hand up to stop the door when it swung open, sure that the strangers outside would burst into the room any second now in the hopes of taking the person in bed by surprise.

Just then, the doorknob twisted slowly, and the door was pushed open until there was a space just wide enough for someone to slip through.

It was so dark in the room that whoever had come inside would need a few seconds to let their eyes acclimate, and I used that temporary blindness to my advantage.

I jumped out in front of the person - I could tell by the size it was a man - and jabbed them in the gut with the base of the lamp.

Before they could even react, I swung it around and slammed the pole against their thigh, unfortunately a little higher than the knee I was aiming for.

I used the momentum to swing around in a circle and smack the intruder on the side

of the head.

Without a sound, he slumped over and slid down the wall.

I knew I had a limited amount of time before the other stranger came into the bedroom.

I stepped onto the base of the lamp and yanked on the cord a few times before it disconnected, leaving me with a length I could use to further disable the intruder.

I worked quickly, rolling the man over to his stomach and jerking his hands behind his back before I tightly tied the cord around his wrists, leaving plenty of length on one end.

I yanked his booted foot up and used the rest of the length to tie his foot to his hands.

Once I was happy with the knots and knew they'd hold, I picked up one of the socks Navy had removed earlier and stuffed it into his mouth.

"Donner!" one of the men in the hall hissed from just outside the bedroom door. "What's going on? Donner!"

Just as the man on the floor groaned, someone tried to open the door again. However, the man's body made the perfect doorstop, and he moaned loudly when the door was shoved open and connected with his ribs. "Navy! Donner! What the fuck's going on?"

I was still ready to attack when I asked, "Who the fuck are you?"

"Where's Navy?" the voice asked.

“I asked you a question, asshole!”

“My name’s Chewie. I’m a friend of Navy’s.”

“If you’re a friend of his, then why are you sneaking around his place in the middle of the goddamn night?”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:39 am

“Because he’s jumpy as hell and it’s hilarious to make him scream like a little girl.”

I was still considering what to do - especially since I didn’t have a way to call for help. My phone was plugged in on the bar at Corrie’s, and I was alone in the building since the other condos were empty right now.

“Shit,” I whispered to myself, not sure if I should trust the man in the hall and terrified of what he would do when he saw how I had greeted his friend.

Suddenly, Boogie shot through the gap in the door, her tail wagging excitedly as she nosed the man on the floor and attacked his face with her tongue.

Since I didn’t have any other option, I flipped on the bedroom light and used the man’s free leg to pull him away from the door. It took all my strength to move him even a few inches, but it gave the man in the hall just enough room for his head to fit.

He looked down at the man on the floor and burst out laughing, loud guffaws that would have woken the neighbors if Navy had any.

“Oz! You’ve gotta see this shit!”

The man’s head disappeared before another man poked his head in for a look and started laughing just as loudly. He stuck his hand through the gap to hand me his phone as he said, “Take a few pics for us, babe. Please?”

“What?”

“This is hilarious, and I can’t wait to tell everyone !”

“You’re not angry?” I asked as I took a few pictures of the man on the floor, making sure I got his whole body in the frame and then took another that included both men’s faces that were now poking into the room. “Who are you?”

“I’m Oz,” the clean-cut man said.

The one with the long hair and beard grinned before he said, “And I’m Chewie from before.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Dalisay.”

The man on the floor started squirming and screaming into his gag. I looked down at him before I winced and asked, “Is he going to hurt me if I untie him?”

“Nah. He might not be your biggest fan for a while, though,” Oz assured me.

“He got his ass kicked by a girl,” Chewie said cheerfully. “This is so great.”

The man was still yelling and flopping around as he tried to pull his hands out of the bindings. I looked up at Chewie and asked, “If I move him out of the way, will you come in and untie him?”

“He won’t hurt you.”

“If I was in his position, I’d certainly jump up and kick my ass, so pardon me if I don’t exactly trust you . . . or him, for that matter.”

“That’s completely understandable,” Oz assured me. He looked down at the man on the floor and ordered, “Move your big ass over so I can get inside.”

The muffled sounds coming from the man reminded me that he had a dirty sock in his mouth. I bent over and earnestly apologized as I removed it.

Once he started cursing me in at least three languages, I had to resist the urge to shove the sock back in. Without thinking, I held it over his face and yelled, “Shut the fuck up, or I’ll put it back!”

The man on the floor took a deep breath, probably to keep himself from screaming, and in the brief silence, I heard one of the men in the hall say, “Fuck Navy. I’m marrying this one.”

???

NAVY

I hurried up the stairs, excited to get back in bed with Dali, but stopped short when I heard men’s laughter coming through my front door.

“What the fuck?” I whispered. The first person I saw when I opened the door was my old friend, Donner, sitting on the couch, holding an ice pack to the side of his head. “Donner? What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I took hostages and then escaped in a guard uniform. I need a place to lay low until the heat . . .”

“Shut up! You got your ass kicked by a girl, and there’s no reason to lie about it,” Dali yelled from her perch on the counter across the room. She lifted her wine glass and motioned toward me as she said, “Navy, I met your friends!”

“Oh, shit!” I said as I smiled at the men seated at the bar. Oz, Sully, and Chewie didn’t look any worse for wear, and they also looked a lot more cheerful than Donner.

“Hey, guys!”

“We picked up a few stragglers on our way down,” Chewie joked. “I didn’t figure you’d mind.”

“Not at all, although it looks like Donner’s latest stint in prison has made him soft.” Donner flipped me off, and I laughed before I said, “I didn’t realize you were out.”

“I’ve been getting acclimated to life on the outside.”

“We were visiting him in Truckee when we got the call,” Oz explained.

“That explains how you got here so quickly,” I said as I walked around the counter to get to Dali. I gave her a quick kiss before I said, “I’m really sorry I didn’t warn you. I thought they wouldn’t be here until tomorrow.”

“Are more of your friends going to appear out of nowhere?” Dali asked.

“A few, yeah.”

In a stage whisper loud enough for everyone to hear, she replied, “I’ll try not to hurt any more of them.”

The men were all laughing as I gave her another kiss. When I pulled back, I asked, “Did he scare you?”

“He was sneaking into your bedroom to scare you . I heard men’s voices in the hall and acted accordingly.”

“Good girl.”

Dali hissed before she whispered, “I didn’t know I liked hearing that until just now.”

“Since they came here to help my family, and now yours too, it would be really rude to kick their asses out so I can take you to bed, wouldn’t it?”

“The height of rudeness.”

“Well, shit.”

Dali laughed before she said, “But if I can spend the night at your place, you can send them all to Corrie’s, and we can have some time alone.”

“That sounds like the perfect plan.”

“Gentlemen, let me show you where you’ll be sleeping,” Dali said as she nudged me aside so she could hop down off the counter. “I’m sure you’re exhausted after your trip.”

“Actually, I was going to . . .”

“Come on! Time’s wasting! Let’s move.”

“I’ll give y’all a few hours to sleep before I wake you up for breakfast so we can sit down and make a plan,” I said as I walked over to the couch and offered my hand to Donner.

He grabbed it, and I pulled him up to stand in front of me before I gave him a quick hug and back slap.

“It’s good to see you back out in the free world. ”

“I don’t plan on leaving it again.”

“Good.”

“Your girl is a miniature badass.”

“She is, isn’t she?”

“Watch out, or I might try to steal her away.”

“I’d almost like to watch you try just so I can have a front row seat to watch her kick your ass.”

“She beat the shit out of me with a lamp!”

“If you think that’s bad, you should hear what her cousin can do.”

N AVY

“How did you guys sleep?”

“I’ve only been out for a week, but this stint wasn’t too long, so it’s been easier to acclimate than it was before.

” When I nodded in understanding, he got a dreamy look on his face before he said, “I don’t know if I could ever get used to sleeping like I did last night.

That bed felt like being hugged by a cloud, and with the air conditioner going, it felt like a walk-in freezer that smelled like home.

I had to give myself a fifteen-minute pep talk before I could make myself get up this morning. ”

His moony smile made the rest of us laugh, but we all understood how he was feeling.

Any time in lockup, whether it was county or federal, was enough to make even the most jaded person appreciate the finer things in life.

Air conditioning, a soft pillow, the scent of clean laundry fresh from the dryer, and the ability to open and close any door you came across were things that most people took for granted, but a person who was incarcerated dreamed about them almost constantly.

“I remember how wonderful it was to sleep in a real bed for the first time after I got out,” Chewie commiserated.

“The second I had some money in my pocket, I went straight to the grocery store and spent every penny on fresh produce and fruit,” Oz said with a wistful expression. “I’d never tasted anything better than that first bite of a fresh peach.”

“I don’t think I went inside for a week,” Sully admitted. “I slept on the front porch of Pop’s every night until it got too cold. I got out in the fall, but I believe if it had been spring or summer, I’d have slept outside for months.”

“I appreciated everything when I got out, but I didn’t feel completely free until I got out on the water.”

“That makes sense, surfer boy.” Donner looked around and asked, “Where’s the ninja?”

I burst out laughing before I explained, “She borrowed my truck and went to a doctor’s appointment.”

“Let’s go for a ride so you can show us the places we need to keep an eye on and the people we should stick close to,” Chewie suggested. “I can’t wait to have some of Rafael’s enchiladas, and I’d love to sit and have a beer with your dad again.”

“Same. It’s been way too long since I saw Clark,” Donner added.

“Dali’s family owns two businesses within a few blocks of Three Sheets. They got hit, too, and then they got the follow-up visit from that smarmy asshole trying to shake them down. They roughed up Dali’s aunt and hospitalized her uncle.”

“Son of a bitch,” Oz hissed.

“I’d like to help them out. It might spread us a little thin, but . . .”

Chewie interrupted, “Then we call in some reinforcements.”

“Ajax will be here this afternoon. He’ll probably know who is available, and he’s got numbers for just about everybody.”

“Has anyone called Lurk?” Chewie asked.

“He’s probably perched outside somewhere, listening to our conversation,” Donner said as he looked out the window at the water. “He does that, you know.”

“I’m sure he does, but the man can’t be everywhere at once,” Chewie argued.

“Are you sure?” Oz asked.

“Not really,” I admitted. I looked at the wall of windows and then felt a chill at the thought of being watched. I turned around and said, “Let’s go for a ride.”

It only took a few minutes to get to the bar which would be opening tomorrow.

Dad and Rafael were already there getting everything ready for the big Three Sheets reopening party for the regulars that had waited patiently.

We walked inside to Dad putting up decorations and Rafael prepping dishes for a feast.

It was nice to see Dad interact with my friends, and Rafael was happy to see them too.

Over the years, I’d had visits from a lot of my club brothers - especially the Nomads

as they traveled through.

Some of them only stopped to catch up over a quick meal while others spent a few days or even a few weeks.

In the course of those visits, Dad had made some lifelong friends in my brothers just like I had.

They all looked up to him as a father figure even though some of them were too old for him to really fill that role. However, Dad had a presence about him that garnered respect, and they appreciated that about him.

Although they teased that he was a little too old to step in the ring for a boxing match, I could tell that the sight of the fading bruises on Dad and Rafael's faces did more than just piss them off.

Like me, it made them homicidal. Men like us who had been forced to be away from our families while we paid our penance for the crimes we'd committed didn't take a minute for granted with the ones we had left.

Once I'd pulled enough beers for us, we went to sit on the patio - another addition Dad had commissioned from some of his new friends he'd met through the VA.

Chewie was the first one to ask, "Do you know where the men who did that to your father live?"

"I don't know about their specific homes, but I've found the location of their clubhouse."

"Clubhouse?" Oz asked. "They ride?" When I nodded, he said, "It's gonna be hard for them to do that without the use of their legs."

Sully clinked his mug against Oz's before he added, "Or their hands."

"We leave their hands alone," I said firmly. "We don't need a connection like that."

Sully nodded before he said, "Good point."

"How many are there?" Donner asked.

"From the reconnaissance I've done, I think there are at least thirty."

"Were they hired by the schmuck that tried to shake your dad down, or is he part of their crew?"

"I believe he's their leader. If not, then he's close to the top. I haven't seen him on a bike, but he's at the clubhouse every day, sometimes for hours."

Oz chuckled before he asked, "Has anyone considered going to those that run this state so we don't have to expend so much energy taking out their trash?"

"I'd like to get my payment in blood first, and then I'll ask Boss to get in touch. These guys do have at least two brain cells to rub together, though. I mean, they do have matching tattoos, but none of them wear colors or anything. I think that may be how they're flying under the radar."

"Do they ride in groups?" Sully asked.

"Never more than four at a time. When they leave the clubhouse, it's in groups of three or four with a gap in between."

"Probably the smartest thing they can do, but that won't work forever. We've gotta get permission to travel here, so it only makes sense that they'd need to pay their own

dues.”

“Oz has a point, but there’s something else we should consider.”

I looked over at Donner and asked, “What’s that?”

“What if they’re a sanctioned club? What if they already have permission?”

I leaned back in my chair and thought about it for a minute before I shook my head.

“That’s something I didn’t even consider.”

Donner took a sip of his beer before he said, “If that’s the case, then they should be wearing support patches somewhere. Any sign of that?”

“None.”

“Do you have any contacts in the local chapter?” Chewie asked. “I’ve got some up north but nothing down this far.”

“I know a few of them from fundraisers and such, but I’m not a big fan of their lifestyle, so I do my best to stay far enough away not to get caught up in their shit.”

“That’s a good idea,” Chewie admitted.

“Obviously, we don’t have enough men to fight them all if it comes down to it, so I think we need to figure out if the local chapter is in on the extortion scheme before we do anything drastic.”

“Good point,” Oz agreed.

“I vote we have Boss reach out,” Sully suggested.

“I’ll call him when we’re done here,” I promised. “For now, we need to make sure that there’s protection here at all times, and maybe even someone hanging out at Dad’s when he’s there.”

“You mentioned that there are more people you want protected, right? The little ninja’s family?”

“Right. They’ve got two businesses up the street. One is run by two women who are about Dad’s age. They were roughed up when the first round happened, just like Dad and Rafael.”

“They’re knocking around old ladies? Fuck that,” Sully snapped angrily.

“Dali’s uncle hasn’t even been released from the hospital yet,” I reminded them.

“We need to put at least two men at each location - one to cover the inside and one outside,” Oz said thoughtfully.

“I volunteer to go with the aunts,” Sully said quickly. “Little old ladies love me.”

“And you love their cooking,” I said knowingly.

“That I do.”

We laughed before I asked, “Who wants to take to the grocery store?”

“I’ll do it,” Donner volunteered.

“Again with the food thing,” I teased.

“I like to fucking eat!”

“Chewie and I can keep an eye on things from outside,” Oz volunteered.

“Ajax is coming this afternoon, and I think he’s got some more guys headed this way. Until then, I’ll hang out here with Dad and Rafael.”

“We’ll be back and forth between all three places,” Chewie assured me.

“As soon as Dali gets here, she can go with us to make the introductions and let her family members know you guys are a safe resource for help.”

“They don’t know we’re coming?” Oz asked. When I shook my head, he said, “I’m not sure that anyone who doesn’t know us would believe we’re not the bad guys. We’re definitely waiting for her.”

“You do look like a bunch of thugs,” I teased.

“Shut up, pretty boy,” Donner growled. “Not all of us can look like we just finished filming Baywatch .”

“ Baywatch , really?” Chewie asked. “Shit, man. How long have you been gone?”

We were all laughing as Donner glared at Chewie. He clapped back with, “Says the man who looks like he rarely comes in from the woods.”

Chewie made his signature sound, just like his namesake from one of my favorite movies. We were still laughing when Dalisay walked into the bar.

I could tell by the look on her face that she was excited, so I stood up and asked, “Did you get the all clear?”

“I did!” Dalisay said as she all but bounced across the bar and jumped into my arms.

“I can get in the water whenever I’m ready.”

“We’ve just got to introduce the guys to your family, and then I’d be happy to take you out!”

“Surf ninja!” Donner teased. “Is there anything the woman can’t do?”

“I don’t have the ability to put up with bullshit or assholes.”

“Then what are you doing with Navy?” Sully asked.

“She can kick his ass if he gets out of line,” Oz said cheerfully. “I can’t wait for the day.”

“I like my women to be a little more . . .”

“Watch yourself,” I warned.

“Sweet and pliable,” Donner finished.

“I’m sweet, and the only one of you who will ever see how pliable I am is Navy.”

“That’s my girl,” I said before I leaned down and kissed her.

“I like the sound of that too.”

???

DALI

“In case I forget to tell you later, this is the best date I’ve ever been on.”

Navy smiled and reached over to tug on my braid before he said, “I’m always happy to be on the water, but seeing how excited you are makes it even better.”

“I’ve missed this so much. Out here, there’s no extra noise or distractions. Nothing stops the waves from doing their thing or keeps the sun from being gorgeous as it sets. There’s no pressure.”

“You’re right.”

“You’ve got a lot on your mind, and I know there are things you should probably be doing right now, but . . .”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be,” Navy assured me. He furrowed his brow before he said, “But I’d like for you to stick close by in case there’s a problem.”

“I haven’t forgotten how to swim, although I would guess that I’m going to fall several times since I haven’t been on a board in so long.”

“I’m afraid something bad could happen now since you told me why it took them so long to release you to go out into the water.”

“A happy life has no room for fear.”

Navy scoffed before he said, “I disagree.”

“Uncertainty, yes. Fear, no. Anything can happen at any time, and the smallest decision can change your life for either better or worse. If you’re afraid of what might happen, you’ll miss out on what could.”

“They were worried that the pressure of the water would make your chest cave in and your heart explode, Dali!”

“That’s a little bit of an exaggeration, but . . .”

“I’ve been pulled under a wave that made me feel like the world was imploding and my bones were on the verge of snapping from the pressure.”

“I’ve been sucked under to where I wondered if I was going to snap, too, but that mostly happened on solid ground.”

“But this . . .”

I shook my head and reached for his hand as I watched a wave build in the distance.
“Don’t let your worries taint the beauty out here, Navy. Just let it be.”

“You’re definitely a surfer at heart.”

“I always have been.”

“Okay, I’m gonna roll with it. I’ll take this one, and you take the next. I think it will make me feel better to watch you ride in so I know if you need me or not.”

I watched as Navy laid flat on the board and used his hands to propel himself so that he could follow the direction of the wave’s crest. In less than a minute, he was standing and riding toward the beach.

As much as I enjoyed his easy company, which was a surprise considering how quickly and drastically our relationship had changed, I needed a few minutes to myself out here. I had missed this feeling so much that it was difficult to explain, but if anyone could understand, it would be him.

He’d been forced away from the ocean and stuck in a cell somewhere.

I'd been teased by water in different areas of the world - none of which I could enjoy the way I did here at home.

He hadn't been around water at all, but for months at a time, I'd been surrounded by it and unable to appreciate it.

Yes, I'd seen sunrises that were breathtaking in so many different locations that I couldn't begin to count them, and I'd watched sunsets transform the sky in just as many places - but none of them were home.

And now, I was finally here, back in the water, reconnecting with my family, and, as an added bonus, my dream of spending time with Anthony had finally come true.

I watched the next wave begin to build and knew that it was mine. This was my first chance to get back to the life I'd loved and missed for the last ten years. And to make it even more wonderful, that wave was going to take me straight to the man of my dreams.

N AVY

“Anyone else need a beer?” Sully asked as he walked toward the bar.

“This is it. I’m never going home. I’m going to live on the roof of your building for the rest of my life.”

“What’s wrong, Maple? You don’t like the weather in Maine?” Wyatt asked.

Maple, another Nomad who happened to be visiting some of our friends in Arizona and was easily convinced to ride to my rescue, scoffed before he looked at his phone and then held it up for us to see. “It’s 41 degrees at my house right now. In June.”

“You bitch about everything,” Goose complained. “When we were at my house, you were whining about . . .”

“It was 107 goddamn degrees in the shade! When you asked me to come visit, I didn’t know that the portal to hell was in your back yard.”

“He bitches every time he comes to see me too,” Ajax said before he lifted his hand and said, “Beer me, Sully!”

“While I was in New Orleans, I couldn’t get dry. I’d shower, put on clean clothes, walk outside, and get instant swamp ass. When I was riding here from Yuma, a bug flew into my mouth, and when I went to spit it out, there was just sand. No saliva at all.”

“If all you do is complain, I’m not gonna let you live on my roof.”

“The last time he came to see me, he bitched about the rain,” Oz chimed in. “If you let him stay here very long, I assure you he’ll find something to complain about.”

“Mostly just the company,” Maple muttered.

“Oh! Navy, I almost forgot to tell you something.”

“What?”

Ajax laughed before he said, “Maple’s in Arizona, and he’s coming with Goose, Wyatt, and Nada.”

“Thanks for the heads up,” I said sarcastically since those particular men were sitting around drinking my beer.

Ajax looked over at Sully and asked, “Didn’t Chewie and Donner come with you?”

“Chewie is spending the night with Dalisay’s aunts, and Donner is staying with her cousins.”

“Who is with your dad and Rafael?” Oz asked.

“Rafael has been staying at Dad’s since his last divorce. Dali and I were going to stay over there, but as I was walking up the sidewalk, I happened to spot a psycho smiling at me from the attic window and realized I wasn’t needed.”

“Does your dad know Lurk’s in his attic?”

“Yeah. He saw him, too, and asked, ‘How did that fucker get into my house again?’”

The men all laughed, well accustomed to Lurk's mysterious ways. For such a large man, he could be scarily invisible when he wanted to, and while he was a true and loyal friend and club brother, he could also be a heartless killer when the situation called for it.

Needless to say, I felt safe leaving my dad and Rafael in the house with Lurk there. An armed militia would have issues getting to them while they were under Lurk's protection, so a few asshole wannabe gangsters didn't have a chance.

"And where is the beautiful ass kicker this evening?" Oz asked.

"She's downstairs on the phone with her mom. When I left my apartment, she was having a heated discussion. I couldn't understand a word either of them were saying, but I'm going to assume that her mom heard what happened at the car wash and the store and wants her to go somewhere safe."

"Probably. Any chance she'd be willing to do that?" Ajax asked.

"Not a single one," I said with a sigh of resignation. "Although, out of all the women I know, Dali is probably the best at taking care of herself."

"She beat the shit out of Donner." Sully laughed before he asked, "Did you guys get the pictures?"

The rest of the men joined in with jokes and laughter at our friend Donner's expense, and Ajax took the opportunity to lean closer and ask, "Did everything go according to plan last night?"

"Absolutely."

"I haven't seen anything about it on the news yet."

“Huh. I wonder if no one’s found him.”

“Wouldn’t hurt my feelings if he just rotted there, all alone in his cave.”

“I’d be okay with that, too, but I really like the thought of him living for a long time with the limitations I created for him.”

“You do realize you’re a complete psychopath, right?”

“Nah. Psychopaths are personable and easily able to fit into any situation. I don’t like people enough to even try.”

“There you go. Diagnosis made,” Ajax said sarcastically.

“How’s Sandi?”

“Perfect in every way,” Ajax answered a little too quickly.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“What makes you think I did something?”

“You’re you.”

“Fuck off.”

“So, what did you do?”

“Nothing! She just blows up over nothing!”

“Really?” Sully asked. “Nothing at all. You’re just minding your own business, and

she suddenly snaps?”

“Yes!” Ajax insisted.

“What did you do?” Oz asked.

“Why in the fuck do you assume that I’m the one at fault here?” When we all just stared at him, he said, “She makes a big deal over nothing every goddamn time it happens.”

“How hard is it for you to put the seat down when you’re finished?” Maple asked. “If I can do it, so can you.”

“It has nothing to do with the bathroom. I’m not a caveman, Maple.” Ajax shook his head before he sighed and said, “It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Obviously, it is or you wouldn’t be sleeping in the doghouse,” Nada pointed out.

“Every time I make a sandwich, she gets pissy. It’s not like I asked her to make it for me! I can take care of myself.”

“Hmm,” Wyatt hummed. “Do you leave the condiments out?”

“Smear peanut butter on the counter?” I asked.

Goose added, “Leave your dirty knife out?”

“He must leave the bread open,” Oz said knowingly. “That would piss me off too.”

“It’s the fucking cheese wrapper! When I forget and leave it on the counter, she goes apeshit.”

“Seriously? My guess is that you do this all the time and probably leave it three feet from the damn trash. It wouldn’t kill you to just throw it away when you’re done.”

Ajax glared at me before he asked, “Have you been talking to Sandi?”

“Why would you think that? Because I sound like the voice of reason?”

“Because that’s exactly what she always says!”

“Always? How often do you do this? Can you not learn from your mistakes?” Sully asked.

“This was something she asked him to do, and he has refused to do it. Something simple can mean so much. Throw the fucking wrapper away and make peace,” Wyatt suggested.

“Fuck off. What happened to solidarity? Brotherhood? Where’s your goddamn loyalty?” Ajax asked in outrage.

“Our loyalty to you isn’t in question, but being part of a brotherhood means we call you out when you’re being stupid. At this rate, you are going to medal in the sport, my friend,” Nada said with a grimace. “And to think, most people believe you’re the brains of this operation.”

Ajax was stunned at the insult and wadded up a napkin one of us had left on the table before he threw it at Nada. It bounced off his shoulder, and Wyatt laughed as he got up from his chair and picked the napkin up off the ground.

“Okay, watch this, Ajax,” Wyatt said as he held the napkin in his outstretched hand.

He kept it there in front of him like a precious object as he slowly walked over to the

trash bin and stepped on the pedal to flip the lid open.

He looked over at Ajax and asked, “You’re paying attention, right? Are you ready?”

As the napkin fell into the trash, Ajax lifted both middle fingers up as he yelled, “Fuck you, Wyatt!”

We roared with laughter and were still laughing when Dali stepped out onto the patio.

She smiled at me and then looked around, clearly surprised to see even more faces she didn’t recognize.

I stood up to meet her halfway, and when I pulled her into my arms, she asked, “What’s got you guys so cheerful? ”

“Wyatt was demonstrating problem-solving skills for Ajax, but he didn’t appreciate them at all.”

“It’s a fucking cheese wrapper!” Ajax bellowed.

“I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but the majority of your friends are completely unhinged,” Dali said as she leaned to the side and peered around my shoulder. She looked up at me before she asked, “You’re not nuts, are you?”

“I’m perfectly sane, Dali.”

The men behind me started laughing again, and Dali raised an eyebrow before she said, “If we’re going to be a thing, you’re gonna have to promise not to lie to me.”

“Where did that come from?” I asked.

“You just said that with a straight face, and everyone in a three-mile radius knows you’re nuttier than a fucking fruitcake!” Maple shouted.

“I think I need new friends.”

???

DALI

“I love your friends,” I said while they hooted and hollered as Navy carried me toward the stairs. “They’re adorable.”

“They’re certifiable, and you’re drunk.”

“Not drunk, just tipsy,” I said as I smiled up at him. “Are you going to make a habit of carrying me around like this?”

“I could.”

“I kind of like it. Makes me feel like a princess.”

“You are a princess,” Navy insisted.

“You treat me like one. I like that too.”

“Good.”

“I think it’s sweet that you handle me as if I’m made of glass when you know I’m made of much sterner stuff.”

“You’ve got a spine of tungsten and a temper like a wildfire that could raze an entire

mountainside, but you're tender to me, and that's what counts."

"You say the sweetest things," I teased as I reached out to open the door to his room.

Once we were inside, he kicked it shut behind him and then turned around and ordered, "Throw that lock there at the top."

"You're going to protect us from friendly intruders?"

"If they interrupt me while I'm making you scream or while we're sleeping, I may not be able to force myself to say nice things about them at their funeral."

I laughed as I engaged the lock and then squealed when Navy let go of my legs and spun me around before he set me on the floor.

"Hello, beautiful," he murmured as he smiled down at me.

I tiptoed up to give him a peck on the lips before I said, "Hey, good lookin'. Got any plans tonight?"

"I'm gonna hook up with this hottie I knew back in the day."

"Hook up, huh?"

"If I call it anything else, she may take off like her ass is on fire."

"She probably won't run quite as fast as you think."

"I'm not willing to risk it."

I all but climbed up his body so I could wrap my legs around his waist, and he

grinned when I said, “I love how big you are.”

“I like how you fit in my hands,” he said as he squeezed my ass.

“I’ve been watching you all night.”

“Is that so?” Navy asked.

“That is so,” I told him before I gave him a lingering kiss. “I’ve been making plans.”

“Do tell.”

“Well, when I came downstairs to get into something more comfortable, I took off my panties,” I murmured against his ear. “Right now, the only thing between me and you is those shorts you . . .”

Somehow, Navy managed to pull his shorts down enough to free his cock, and before I could finish my sentence, he was pushing himself deep inside me.

I threw my head back with a moan and used the grip I had with my legs to move up and then back down again, ever so slowly to tease him.

I did it again and knew it was working when he growled low in his throat and squeezed my ass so hard I was sure I’d have bruises tomorrow.

I didn’t care, though. This position, one of the few we hadn’t tried last night, was perfect in the way that it molded our bodies together.

I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep the teasing up for much longer, but I slowly raised myself up again and then went back down until my clit bumped against him over and over.

I used my grip on his neck to pull myself up even higher and then squeezed with my legs as I dropped down harder and faster than before.

When my legs started shaking from the exertion, I asked, “Am I gonna have to do all the work here, or are you going to . . .”

Suddenly, my back hit the wall hard enough to rattle the picture frames hanging nearby, but I was almost too shocked to notice. Navy positioned himself so that my knees were resting over his arms and then slammed into me harder than he ever had before.

In just a few strokes, I was coming so hard that I could barely catch my breath between screaming his name and begging him not to stop.

And he didn't. He didn't even slow down.

Instead, he carried me toward the bed while flexing his arms as he lifted me up and down.

I did what I could to help, but my blissed-out state made it difficult to concentrate.

By the time we got to the bed and he covered me with his body, I was close again.

The second he let go of my leg and swirled the pad of his thumb over my clit, I went off like a rocket, writhing beneath him as I called his name over and over.

With a roar, he came deep inside me and then planted his elbows beside my shoulders as he collapsed on top of me.

“Fuck,” he muttered as my body squeezed him one more time, milking his cock and making him shudder with the last dregs of his own orgasm. He finally took a deep

breath and shook his head before he rolled us over so I was sprawled on top of him.

I laid my head on his chest and sighed in contentment as my eyes fluttered closed. My body was sated and ready for sleep. I knew I should get up and clean myself, but I just couldn't muster up the energy to move.

I was almost asleep when Navy kissed me on the forehead and whispered, "If you run, I'll chase you to the ends of the earth."

I lifted my head and kissed his lips before I whispered back, "I'm not going anywhere."

D ALI

“I have no idea what I’m going to do with my life,” I admitted as I flopped back onto Jodie’s bed. I could hear my cousin slamming things around in the bathroom, so I lifted my head and asked, “What are you doing?”

“My daughter is a thief.”

“What did Jaimee steal?” I asked with a laugh as I laid my head back down.

“I just bought mascara, and it’s gone along with . . . Okay, I’ll let her live. My mascara is gone, but she left the lipstick.”

“Where is your better half? She is, you know.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” Jodie replied as she walked into the bedroom. “She’s at the beach with friends, soaking up the sun and making the most of her summer before I move her into the dorms in August.”

“I can tell by the look on your face and the tone of your voice that she’s handling this much better than you are.”

“I missed too much time with her already, and now she’s leaving,” Jodie said sadly. Suddenly, she shook her head and pasted on a smile. “Nope. Not going down that road. It’s not like she’s moving to Australia or something. She’s just going to be a few hours away.”

I rolled to my side and propped my head on my hand before I pointed out, “You’ve had five great years with her. Now it’s time for her to spread her wings and take all the things you’ve taught her out into the world so she can do wonderful things with her life.”

“Keep saying some version of that for the next four years or so, okay?”

“I’ll change it up so it doesn’t get boring.”

“Speaking of changing things up, tell me how things are going with you and Anthony. He looked like he was ready to rip your clothes off when he found you at the store with me.”

“He tried to be noble but I wasn’t having any of it.”

Jodie started laughing before she asked, “Seduced him, did ya?”

“It didn’t take much effort,” I said with a grin. I flopped onto my back and sighed before I said, “I never imagined that I’d wake up in Anthony Michaels’ bed!”

“You’re living proof that dreams come true.”

“I know, right?”

“God, you’ve got it bad,” Jodie said as she sat on the end of the bed and bent over to pull on her shoes. “I just hope he lives up to the hype.”

“What hype?”

“You’ve been dreaming about the man since you were a kid.”

“Since I was a kid? You act like you’re ages older than I am.”

“I might only be a few years older, but my life took a very different path than yours. I just hope your dream man doesn’t turn into the monster mine did.”

“There’s no way in hell Navy would ever lay a hand on me.”

“I know.” When I just stared at her, she said it more emphatically. “I know ! I just assume a man’s going to flip behind closed doors until I know for sure that he won’t. Even then, I’m always suspicious.”

“Surely, you’ve dated since you’ve been home.” When Jodie just shrugged, I sat up so that we were side by side and softly asked, “Haven’t you?”

“Nothing serious.”

“What?”

“I’ve had a few . . . encounters.”

“Encounters?”

“That sounds better than one-night stands, doesn’t it?”

“I guess. So, you haven’t dated anyone seriously since you’ve been out?”

“I’ve been busy!”

“For five years?”

“Time kind of got away from me.”

“I guess so. We’ll have to find you a good man to corrupt.”

“Oh, no. You better not start in on that shit too. I’ve got enough pressure from the aunts. Even Dad has sent men my way.”

“It might be time to give love a chance.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re mesmerized by Anthony and his .

. . Is it big?” I shoved her away, and she laughed as she stood up and walked back into the bathroom to finish her hair.

“You’ve got that freshly fucked glow about you, so I’m going to assume that it’s better than average and he knows how to use it. ”

“Oh, he does.”

“My question is what kind of man is he outside of the bedroom?”

“We’ve known him forever, Jodie. You know he’s a good guy.”

“Even good guys have secrets, sweetheart. Especially the ones that seem too good to be true.”

“Not Navy. He’s a unicorn.”

“Yep. You’re completely dickmatized.”

“That’s not even a word.”

“If it wasn’t before, it is now. That’s the only way to describe the look on your face

and the blind faith you have in a man you haven't talked to in ten years."

"We've all got skeletons in our closet, Jodie. You know that."

"I do. I just hope his don't rattle too loudly when you find them."

???

NAVY

"I've got this Anthony! You don't need to stay all night."

I smiled at Karlie, not quite sure how much we should tell her about the situation, especially since I knew that once any of my brothers got their hands on the men who had threatened my father and our family business, their injuries would end up on the news.

I wasn't worried about my brothers getting caught - we'd all learned our lesson the first time.

Even though we weren't exactly law-abiding citizens, we were much more careful than we'd been before.

I decided to give her the basics and explained, "Dad was attacked by some thugs. A few days later, a man came with a couple of goons to shake Dad down for protection money and threatened that much worse would happen if he didn't pay up."

"Oh, hell no!"

"That's a much nicer way to put what I thought about the situation."

“Did you call the cops?”

“We did after the attack but not when they came to shake us down.”

Karlie looked out over the few patrons that were still in the bar this late.

They were mostly regulars who were just glad to have their home away from home finally open again.

Trout, one of my club brothers, was sitting at one end of the bar, minding his own business as he watched over things and relaxed after his long ride from Wyoming.

Her eyes drifted toward the other end of the bar where another club brother, Shorty, was seated. She watched him as he stared at his phone and then frowned before she looked back over at Trout.

I didn’t want to draw attention to our connection, so I hadn’t talked to either of them any more than any other patron. You could never be too careful.

Dismissing the two men who happened to be here right now, she asked, “Those two hotties who came in to talk to you earlier are part of your solution, aren’t they?”

When I nodded, she said, “Good. If you need a place to bury the bodies, I inherited some land from my grandpa.”

Trout coughed, and I knew he was trying to hide his laughter, but Shorty wasn’t quite as successful. He barked out a loud laugh and then cleared his throat. When he saw Karlie and I watching him, he grabbed his phone and mumbled, “Sorry.”

Karlie ignored him and said, “I’m serious. You know I love your family, Anthony. All of you have stood by me through some of the hardest times in my life and cheered

me on through some of the best. I'd do anything for the three of you."

"Thanks, Karlie. We're glad to have you as part of our family."

"Well, keep that land in mind. It's not much, but it's mine, and I don't ever plan to sell."

"That's good to know. I'll keep it in mind as an option if something comes up that needs to be hidden."

"The land is almost a hundred acres, so neighbors aren't a problem, and there's a barn out there too," Karlie hinted.

"Do you go out there very often?"

"I'll go out and forage for berries for jelly when I get an urge to be Holly Homesteader, but other than that, not really."

There are a few plots I lease to neighbors for grazing to help me pay the property taxes, and that land is fenced off.

The rest is on the mountain, so it's not good for much. "

"Are you keeping it in case you win the lottery one day and decide to build a mansion?"

Karlie laughed before she said, "If I wanted to build a mansion, I'd sell the land for a stack of cash and live somewhere else."

I knew Karlie well enough to know that her offer was real, and she wouldn't blink an eye if I asked her to keep a secret. I filed that away for now but thought it could come

in handy if we needed a quiet place to conduct some business.

And by business, I meant torture and killing, but business all the same.

Karlie must have sensed my uncertainty because she looked something up on her phone and then slid a napkin down the bar toward me. I glanced down and saw she'd written down coordinates and a four-digit code. When I looked up at her, she smiled and said, "That's for the gate."

"You're the best."

"No, your dad is the best."

"Thanks, Karlie," I said as I slipped the napkin into my pocket. I put my arm over her shoulders before I lowered my voice and said, "If I happen to go out there, I'm not going to tell you about it."

"Good because I like living in the land of 'I didn't see nothin', I didn't hear nothin', and I don't know shit.'"

"Since I'm staying anyway, why don't you go ahead and take off? I'll close up."

Karlie scoffed before she walked over to the cabinet and pulled out her purse. "I'm leaving before you change your mind."

I chuckled as she walked toward the door. As she called out her goodbyes to the regulars, I caught Shorty's eye, and he nodded before he slipped his phone into his pocket. As soon as the door closed behind Karlie, he was out of his seat, headed outside to make sure she got to her car safely.

I looked at the clock and saw that it was time for last call, so I made my way around

the bar toward the customers seated at the tables to let them know this was their last chance for a drink.

By the time I got back behind the bar, Shorty had returned to his seat and was watching the news intently.

As soon as I read the caption, I used the remote to turn up the volume.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:39 am

“The string of crimes has baffled detectives. Other than a history of crimes against women and children, the victims don’t seem to have any connection.

A source at the police department mentioned that the only clues collected from the scenes were computer files and images that will be used to convict the same men who are listed as victims in this case. ”

The shot returned to the two news anchors, a man and a woman, and a map appeared behind them as the man asked, “Are these attacks solely in the Oceanside and San Diego areas?”

“No, Bill. Further investigation shows that these attacks have been happening for years all over the country. As a matter of fact, there have been three victims in Alaska in the last two years.”

“It feels strange to call these predators the victims,” Bill argued.

“You’re right, but in this case, that’s exactly what they are.”

“The guy needs a name,” a customer said as he reached for his wallet, his eyes still on the television.

“They only give names to serial killers, not heroes,” his friend argued.

“My friend Ronnie knows a guy who works for the SDPD, and he said that they instantly knew it was the same guy because he does things to the perverts that guarantee they won’t be doing nasty things with kids anymore.”

“Like what?” I asked, curious about the details spit out by the rumor mill.

“He cuts their dick off and makes them eat it.”

“Ew,” I said before I shuddered at the thought of touching those monsters’ private parts.

I’d seen almost every one of them in person other than a few that Preacher and Ajax had farmed out to some of my club brothers.

Even though their crimes made them deserve such a punishment, I wasn’t about to get near their dick.

“I heard he castrates ‘em,” the other man added. “Serves ‘em right for messing with kids.”

Another regular walked up to pay his tab and repeated what he always said when the subject came up. “That man’s doing the Lord’s work and deserves a medal.”

“The only thing the cops are gonna give him is a strip search and a court date.”

“They can’t. He’s a ghost. Doesn’t leave a single clue. No hair, no fibers, nothing !” the first man said in awe.

“Good for him.”

“It’s crazy to think that we’re all rooting for one psycho against all the others.”

I laughed before I said, “Everyone loves Batman, but if you really analyze him, he’s pretty fucked up.”

“Batman?” Trout said as he rolled his eyes. “Come on!”

“If he ever gets caught, I’ll donate a month’s pay toward his lawyer,” the second customer boasted. The other two agreed as they walked toward the door with their friends.

Once the bar had cleared out, Shorty walked over and locked up before he turned around and said, “You can’t be Batman. He’s got lots of money and much cooler toys than you’ll ever have.”

“I wasn’t saying I’m Batman, just that he’s a little unhinged and still considered a superhero.”

“Speaking of unhinged, I hear you’ve got yourself a girlfriend,” Trout said as he dragged the trash can toward the table where the customers had been sitting.

Shorty leaned over the bar and grabbed a towel and the spray bottle of cleaner before he went to work, calling out, “What’s that going to mean for your Batman roleplaying?”

“What kind of question is that? It’s not like I’m taking her with me or something.”

“Are you going to keep doing it?” Trout asked.

“Why would I stop?”

“Rooster quit when his old lady moved in, and Dice took his name off the roster when his kid was born,” Shorty noted.

“We’ve only been seeing each other for a couple of days, guys. It’s not like we’re hearing wedding bells or planning a family.”

“At your age, that’s probably a good thing.”

I looked over at Shorty and asked, “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Well, I guess if she wants kids, that’s something to consider.”

“Two fucking days, guys! Two !”

“If you’re gonna get serious with her, which I’m assuming you will since you’ve been pining after her for years, then you’re gonna have to start thinking about shit like that,” Trout chided. “And you’re gonna have to think about stopping your extracurricular activities too.”

“Why would I?” I asked.

“What if you get caught?” Shorty asked.

Trout chimed in at the same time, “What if she finds out?”

“What if I keep my outside shit exactly that and make sure what I do stays separated from Dali?”

“How is that going to work?” Trout asked.

“It’s been working so far. My family has no idea.”

“Because none of them will be laying in bed at night and thinking you’re cheating on them with some hussy from the local strip joint while you’re out playing the Caped Crusader.”

I glared at Shorty before I said, “There’s so much to unpack there that I’m not sure

where to start.”

“Ignore the fact that Shorty’s got a problem with strippers, and go straight to the part where she wakes up in the middle of the night and you’re nowhere to be found.”

I smirked before I admitted, “That could be an issue.”

“I’ll say,” Trout agreed.

“But I don’t know. The first night she stayed over, I told her that I had somewhere I needed to be, and she was fine with it.”

“The first night.” Trout laughed before Shorty said, “When you get past that cuddly, fluffy part of the relationship where you don’t want any secrets between you and into the part where she wants to know why that girl over there is staring at you and what took you so long to get home, she’s gonna need more info. ”

“What kind of women do you date?” I asked Shorty.

Trout laughed before he said, “The kind a sane man avoids at all costs.”

“We’re not talking about me,” Shorty said as he walked around the end of the bar and started running water to wash glasses.

As I ran the end-of-day tape on the register, he started washing before he said, “How are you going to explain that you’re gonna be gone for a few hours, can’t tell her shit about what you’re doing or where you’ll be, and she can’t come with you? ”

“I have no fucking idea.”

Trout laughed before he said, “Obviously, but you better start thinking about it.”

N AVY

“Wake up, pretty lady,” I whispered in Dali’s ear.

“Mornin’,” she murmured as she put her hand on my chest. She moved it back and forth for a second before she opened one eye and asked, “Why are you dressed?”

“I went upstairs to make sure all the guys got settled in and realized it’s the perfect night to surf.”

“Really?” Dali asked as she closed her eyes again.

“Come on, babe. We’re missing out on a beautiful full moon and some killer waves.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s about three in the morning.”

“Weren’t you sleeping five minutes ago?” Dali asked.

“It was more like fifteen, but yeah.” I gently shook her shoulder again.

She opened both eyes this time and asked me, “Is this a thing you do often?”

“Hell yes.”

“You’re not nearly as cute right now as you were when we came to bed last night.”

I laughed as I pulled the sheet and blanket from her naked body and then wondered why in the hell I was so amped to go out into the cold surf rather than crawl back into bed with this warm, gorgeous woman.

Since the guys got here four days ago, Dali and I hadn't spent a night apart.

We were using the excuse that they were sleeping at Corrie's, so she needed to stay here, but everyone knew I had two empty rooms in my house and plenty of space in the condos downstairs to house them without her having to give up her space.

Instead, we'd just rolled with it. I had helped Dali move her suitcases over to my place, leaving Corrie's home for the guys.

We had even worked out a daily routine. I woke up early and took meetings with clients before I worked on their requests and then did more online investigating to find out about the men we were expecting to come back to the bar within the next few days.

I was pulled out of my musings when Dali asked, "Why are you just standing there looking at me like a weirdo?"

"You're still as gorgeous as you've always been."

"You're way too chipper for the middle of the night."

"You'd think after ten years on ship, you'd wake up a little easier than this."

"You'd think that since I've been on land for the last six months, I shouldn't have to drag my ass out of bed on someone else's whim," Dali muttered as she sat up and ran her hand over her face.

“I just learned something new about you, Dalisay.”

“I can’t imagine what,” she said as she put her feet on the floor and leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees.

“You are not a morning person.”

“You should already know that.”

“You’ve been nothing but nice to me since we started spending our nights together.”

“Because when you wake me up, you’ve usually got your mouth full of my nipple or my pussy which means you’re not fucking talking.”

I burst out laughing, and Dali scowled as she walked toward the bathroom. “I’m up now, so you can stop being all cheerful and shit. Give me five minutes to put on my suit and brush my teeth.”

“You don’t have to go with me, babe,” I reminded her.

She leaned out of the bathroom and glared at me before she said, “It’s nice of you to offer that now that I’m already awake.”

When I started laughing again, Dali slammed the door, but that just made me laugh even harder. I looked down and found Boogie staring at the bathroom door like she was waiting for a monster to appear and chuckled as I walked to my dresser to find a pair of trunks to wear.

Since Dali and I got together and my club brothers had started trickling in, I hadn’t had time to do my usual household chores.

Laundry was flowing over the edge of the basket onto the floor, there were shoes here and there - which had always been a bad habit of mine and had driven my mother nuts when I lived at home, and I hadn't gotten groceries in more than a week.

The only fresh items in my house were what I had harvested from the patio garden, but even that had been neglected lately.

And it seemed that life was just going to get busier. Today was the deadline that asshole had given my father, and we'd been preparing for whatever repercussions he thought he was going to dole out when my father told him to fuck off.

Although, I wasn't sure the man would show up after all, considering how hard my friends and I had been working to thin the number of minions available to do his bidding.

Seven of them had been involved in unexplainable accidents that included everything from slipping in the shower and getting a catastrophic head injury to tripping over something while taking out the trash and ending up with a broken neck.

It seemed that the men with tattooed fingers were experiencing an unrelenting string of bad luck.

It had turned into a gruesome sort of competition with the standout so far being the guy who fried himself after sticking a butter knife into the brand new toaster he'd just pulled out of its box.

That meant Ajax was in the lead for the funniest and most obscure "accident." The bastard.

"Okay, I'm ready and feeling a little less murderous," Dali announced as she walked out of the bathroom wearing a one-piece that hugged her curves in a way that made

me jealous of the fabric. “Take me surfing and then buy me breakfast before we come home and take a nap.

Home.

That one word made my heart stop for a second before it started racing.

Dali already considered my house her home, which I hadn’t had a problem with until Trout and Shorty started spewing their bullshit about how much my life would have to change in order to have Dali with me all the time.

“Why do you look like you’re about to either pass out or take off?” Dali asked as she stopped in front of me. She put her hand on my cheek before she said, “I’m sorry I was grouchy earlier, but I’m not completely human for the first few minutes after I wake up.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, but that’s not what’s bothering me.”

“Then what is it?”

“Let’s talk about it on the water.”

Dali raised her eyebrows before she asked, “Where I’m basically a hostage and can’t outrun whatever bad news you’re going to tell me?”

“It’s nothing like that!”

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?” she asked as she walked toward the front door. “Either way, I’m up and ready to conquer the world.”

“That was a quick turnaround.”

“And it will be bloodless as long as I get pancakes and a midmorning nap.”

???

DALI

I wasn't firing on all cylinders when I walked out of the bathroom, but the second Navy said that he needed to talk to me, I was wide awake.

I had been trying not to acknowledge that we were moving way too fast. Even though we'd known each other almost our entire lives, we had really taken this at lightspeed.

And we hadn't known each other . . . not really.

I was the annoying little girl who bothered him, and then I was the adoring teenager who probably still annoyed him.

Other than that, we had one fun evening surrounded by our friends and family before I left for ten years.

People couldn't go from virtually being strangers to living together in a day! At least sane people couldn't. Right?

Of course that was right. No one with an ounce of self-preservation would move this quickly in a relationship, so I apparently had none of that. Not a drop.

And now I was going to pay the price. My infatuation with the man had blinded me to reality, but he clearly didn't have that problem. No one would blame him for wanting to pump the brakes so he could take a step back and reassess.

If one of my friends told me that they'd reconnected with an old flame after ten years

and moved in with them after their first date, I would have confronted them about the red flag in their face and begged them to slow down.

But Navy and I weren't old flames. Hell, we weren't even old friends, really.

Old friends kept in touch, even if it was just sporadically. I hadn't talked to the man in a decade!

But I sure as hell had moved right in as if I didn't have a care in the world.

Jodie was right. I'd been dickmatized.

"Slow down, Dalisay!" Navy yelled from somewhere behind me.

I ignored him and walked out into the surf with the board I'd borrowed from him before I laid down and started paddling out.

It didn't take him long to catch up, being that his long, muscular arms had much more reach and power than mine.

I needed to hide my tears before he saw them in the moonlight.

"What's wrong, babe?"

"I know we've moved way too fast, but I hope that hasn't soured you on this entirely," I blurted out before I rubbed my wet hand over my face to mask my tears. "I'll move my things back to Corrie's, and we can take it slow."

"Hold up! That is not what I wanted to talk about."

I stopped paddling and sat up on my board so I could look at him, and he did the

same before he reached out and took my hand so we wouldn't drift apart.

"If that isn't it, then what do you want to talk about?"

"Do you think we're moving too fast?" Navy asked.

"Of course I do!"

"But does it feel right?" he asked in a gentler tone. When I didn't answer, he squeezed my hand and urged, "Be honest, Dali."

"Yes. It feels perfect and right and wonderful and too good to be true."

"Maybe it's time for that. Maybe we've just been coasting along waiting for this exact thing."

"This thing?"

"Us."

"You're not going to tell me we're moving too fast?"

"I was the one who asked you out, remember? And, if I recall, I was also the one who helped you pack and move your things to my place."

I had to admit, he was right. I'd balked at the idea, but he'd convinced me, and I hadn't argued . . . Not even a little bit. "And now you're regretting it?"

"Babe, I know you're capable of lots of things, but reading minds isn't one of them."

I laughed before I conceded, "I've never really been good at that."

“You’re pretty damn good at jumping to conclusions, though,” Navy teased.

“What do you need to talk to me about?”

“First of all, I’ll warn you that if you try to move your things back to Corrie’s, I’m just going to move it all back to mine,” Navy said.

“If I really wanted to, you’d let me.”

“Maybe,” Navy hedged. “But you don’t want to, so that’s not what we need to talk about.”

I let go of his hand and threw mine in the air in exasperation. “Then what are we talking about?”

“I’ve got some things going on in my life that I can’t tell you about and won’t ever tell you about.”

“What kind of things?” When Navy just frowned, I cautioned, “You’ve gotta give me a hint here, or I’m going to start jumping again.”

“Sometimes, I’ll need to take off for a while. Most of the time, it’s just a few hours, but other times, it’s a day or two.”

“Will I have any warning when these adventures might arise?”

Navy shrugged before he said, “Probably.”

“You don’t sound very sure about that. Is that a question or an answer?”

“That’s all I’ve got.”

“And you’re not willing to tell me what you’re doing during these random trips?”

“Right.”

“So, what you’re doing is illegal.” Navy didn’t say anything, and the expression on his face didn’t change. I laughed bitterly before I said, “Is it bad that I’d rather know that than to think you’ve got a side piece?”

“I would never cheat on you!”

“I know that’s not in your nature. You were raised better than that.”

“But you’re okay knowing that I may be doing something illegal when I leave occasionally?”

“I wouldn’t say that I approve as much as I just accept it.”

“This conversation has gone much better than it played out in my head.”

“But you’ve just put more information out on the table. We didn’t actually settle anything.”

“It’s not settled?” Navy asked.

“You’re going out to commit crimes, and I’m just supposed to be okay with it?”

Navy blew out a frustrated breath before he said to himself, “I knew it couldn’t be that easy.”

We were quiet for a few minutes, each of us lost in thought while appreciating the beauty and peace of the ocean.

I looked over my shoulder and found that we had drifted quite a distance from the shore, but I didn't mind at all.

It was so serene. I could stay out here for hours at a time just floating on my board while I soaked in the calm vibes of the water.

Finally, I broke the silence and said, "The Anthony I know would never hurt someone when it wasn't warranted.

You didn't go to prison for dealing drugs or stealing from people.

You went to prison for going above and beyond to avenge what was happening with your sister.

I'd like to believe that, deep down, Navy is the same kind of man as Anthony, and he'd never recklessly hurt someone who didn't deserve it. "

"Thanks, I think."

"Jodie went to prison for protecting someone who couldn't protect herself. She did it for her daughter's safety. You went to prison because the judge didn't appreciate your method of bringing the bastard who hurt your sister to the authorities."

Navy threw his head back and laughed before he said, "That's a new angle. I like it."

"What I'm saying is that if you happen to be doing something that skirts the law, you're probably doing it for a good reason. I'd like to think that you're smart enough in this . . . endeavor . . . to make sure you won't get caught."

"That's the plan," Navy said sarcastically.

“I know you can’t tell me . . .”

“ Won’t tell you,” Navy interrupted.

“Okay then. You won’t tell me what it is you’re doing when you disappear, and I’m perfectly okay with that, knowing that whatever you’re doing will only benefit our world.”

“Dali, there’s no way in hell you believe that.”

“That’s how I feel.”

“That’s how you feel right now, but if that changes, I want you to tell me.”

“If I told you that I want you to stop doing whatever the hell this is, would you?”

Navy frowned before he slowly shook his head. “I don’t think I can. I don’t do these things because someone is forcing me, but because I believe what I’m doing is right.”

“Then I’m going to trust that and stand behind you.”

“I’ll never let what I do affect you, Dali.”

“You know how to make sure of that, don’t you?”

“How?” Navy asked.

“Don’t ever get caught.”

N AVY

I directed my attention to the three big screen TVs I'd installed in the office yesterday.

The one on the left transmitted feed from the cameras Sully had installed inside the office and around the outside of the car wash, and the one on the right was connected to the cameras Donner had installed in and around the grocery store.

The middle television gave me a view of the bar.

Each screen showed multiple views, and I could see every customer that walked in and out of all three locations, none of which had looked suspicious so far today.

Since we hadn't been able to pin down this Diablo idiot yet, we weren't sure when he might appear.

However, we had eyes on the clubhouse where he'd been seen.

If he showed up there, we were prepared to overrun the place and cut the head off the snake and make sure that his goon squad didn't continue his efforts.

As much as I'd enjoyed fucking with the wannabe bikers who thought they could take over this section of Oceanside, I was ready for this to be over.

My dad and Dali's family would be able to sleep a little easier as would the other business owners who had been threatened.

I couldn't protect everyone, so I would just make the problem go away.

The burner phone I'd programmed last night beeped before I heard Lurk's voice say, "They're saddling up right now."

There are almost two dozen assholes firing up their .

. ." There was suddenly a huge explosion followed by two more in the background.

Lurk started laughing before he said, "Make that a dozen."

"What did you do?"

In an almost petulant tone, Lurk said, "You told me I could play with them."

"I did, didn't I?"

"If you didn't want me to do fun things, you should have said that."

Ajax was sprawled out on the couch beneath the TVs, and he chuckled before he reminded me, "Lurk is not a man to give an open-ended invitation to, brother."

I ignored Ajax and asked, "What else did you do?"

"Nothing yet, but I've got plans. Are you gonna be an asshole and tell me to scrap 'em?"

"Just remember that wildfires are a real risk around here, okay?"

"Implode not explode. Got it." He laughed again before he said, "I'll call you when they stop running around like chickens with their heads cut off and decide to try

again. Over and out, good buddy!”

“What the fuck?” I hissed as I set the phone down on the desk.

“He wasn’t always like this. This pyromaniac thing is a new development. I think he might be devolving.”

“Have you been watching documentaries again?” I asked.

“Maybe,” Ajax answered without opening his eyes. “Leave me alone. We stayed up too late, and I’m hungover.”

“I don’t think this asshole is going to do anything in the light of day anyway.”

“He’ll show his face, make some threats, and then send whatever minions Lurk hasn’t managed to blow up to do his dirty work under cover of darkness,” Ajax predicted.

“If he gives it enough time, there won’t be any minions left.”

Ajax snickered before he said, “I know. Especially now that Donner’s out. The man has quite a bit of pent-up aggression. I think he needs to get laid almost as much as I need a nap.”

Since there were at least two men inside each location and even more roaming around outside, I took this opportunity to open my laptop and finish some work. Luckily, Dali was very understanding when I had a meeting or needed to get something finished, but I hated leaving her bored and alone.

I smiled when I remembered how hard she’d laughed when I told her that and how chagrined I was when she explained that too much togetherness would be bad for my health because she was a woman who appreciated her alone time and wasn’t willing

to give it up.

That reminded me of our conversation this morning, so I decided to use this time alone with Ajax to get some advice.

“What does Sandi think about you skirting the law now and then?”

“Napping means I’m going to sleep. It does not mean I want to have a tea party and talk about my feelings.”

“I’m asking you an honest question.”

“Why are we talking about Sandi when you’re the one having a problem?”

“I’m not going to tell Dali what I do.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“I’m also not going to stop.”

“Your extracurricular activities are your business, Navy. If at some point you’ve had enough, we will find someone to take up the slack. Obviously, our guys don’t have a problem stepping in when they’re needed, but it’s up to them to say when it’s time to step back.”

“Do you think I should tell Dali what I’m doing when I take off for parts unknown?”

“Absolutely not!”

“I just leave her to wonder?”

“Have you broached the subject yet?” Ajax quickly said, “Obviously you have. It seems like everything you do with this woman is at warp speed.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“What happens when things slow down?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“When the new wears off, where will it leave you?”

“Together, I hope.”

“What are her thoughts on the subject?”

“When we talked about it this morning out on the water, she said she’s okay with it and she’s not going to push me to tell her what it is. Her only request was that I not get caught.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“What happens if I do?”

Ajax lifted his head to stare at me before he said, “Well, you’ll end up back in prison.”

“And then what happens to her?”

“Since when did you become such a worrywart?” Ajax asked as he relaxed again and closed his eyes. “Was it when you started talking about feelings and shit?”

“Sometimes, I don’t like you at all.”

“Yet here we are, hanging out and having quality time while I’d rather be napping.”

“You’re not going to give me any advice, are you?”

“What’s there to say? If you tell her what you’re .

. . what we are up to, then she’s culpable if one of us gets caught.

If that doesn’t happen but the two of you split, then that leaves you, as well as the rest of us, open to retaliation.

When we started this shit we made a pact to keep it quiet. ”

“You haven’t told Sandi what we do on the side?”

“Nope.”

“Do you think Preacher has told Blue?”

“Probably not.”

“But you’re not sure?”

“I’m almost positive he hasn’t, because if Blue knew what we were up to, she’d want to be put on the roster, and then she’d get pissed when we didn’t give her enough toys to play with.”

“You’re right. She’s not normal.”

“Not at all. I think that’s part of her charm. Obviously, so does Preacher.”

“What would Sandi do if she found out?”

Ajax laughed before he answered, “She’d probably use her medical knowledge to give me some tips and tricks to make things even worse for the fuckers.”

“I’m not going to tell Dali.”

“Just like I’m not going to tell Sandi.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? Does that mean we can stop talking about it? Is your crisis over?”

“Thanks for being such a supportive friend.”

“No thanks necessary. It’s in my nature to be helpful.”

I’d been working for almost an hour when the burner phone beeped again followed by Donner’s voice. “We’ve got movement in the parking lot. Four riders and a Town Car with an unknown number of passengers.”

“Shit,” I said as Ajax sat up and looked at the screen.

“Is Oz ready?” I asked.

“He’s waiting at the front next to Nathan.”

“I’ll alert the guys at the car wash to be ready,” I told Donner, who was hiding somewhere in the store in case Oz needed backup.

I reached out to everyone else who had been given a burner and said, “The dipshit is getting groceries and will probably be washing his car soon.”

A cacophony of men’s voices replied, “Copy,” as they hurried down alleyways and back yards to get into position.

“Lurk, are you ready at the clubhouse?”

“So fucking ready,” Lurk assured me with a childlike giggle.

“Devolving,” Ajax muttered under his breath. “We’ve really gotta get him a woman to calm him down some.”

“Let’s put that on our agenda for next month,” I said irritably.

“Chewie? Are you ready at the car wash?” I asked as I looked over at that screen and watched Sully herding Dali’s aunts toward an SUV. Once they were safely in the back seat, Sully took off.

“Everything’s set,” Chewie replied just as he flipped the sign on the door from “open” to “closed.” “We’ll be waiting.”

Ajax had walked over so he could see the screen easier and leaned against my desk to watch the action. I pressed play on the audio recording and got closer to look at the man who was stepping out of the car.

“That’s him.”

“He looks like a complete douche.”

“I know. That’s why I’m not sure he’s the one in charge.”

We watched the man look around before he nodded at the driver and then walked toward the front door of the office. “No, he’s in charge. Not a thug, though. At least not now. You can tell by the way he carries himself that he used to be. Run that plate.”

“On it,” I assured him as I typed it into my laptop. “I’ll have his information before Oz even has time to tell him to fuck off.”

I listened to Oz’s strong voice as he greeted Diablo and his minions as if they were just regular customers.

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the information that had come up after running the license plate and then scrambled to get to my phone so I could make a call.

Preacher answered almost immediately and asked, “What’s wrong? Everything seems to be going fine.”

“Check the plate, and see if you recognize that name.”

“What?” Preacher asked. As he typed, I heard him mumble, “I should have already done that.” A few seconds later, he hissed and asked, “What the fuck?”

“Yep. What the fuck is right. Apparently, he’s got a lot more going on than strong-arming mom-and-pop businesses.”

“Who is it?” Ajax asked.

“He’s on the schedule for Sunday,” I said quietly as I turned my laptop so Ajax could see the screen.

“I just did a deep dive on the address that plate is registered to,” Preacher said.

“You’re never gonna believe this.”

“What?”

“That car is registered to a building that’s owned by your illustrious mayor.”

“What?” I yelled.

“And he’s also the mayor’s half-brother.”

“Oh, shit,” Ajax hissed as he looked back at the screens on the wall.

“How did we miss that?” I asked.

“We never had a firm address because of his location. It looks like a warehouse too far from your place that’s owned by a company that’s owned by another company . . . You get the picture. That business just happens to be in the mayor’s name.”

“Looks like we’re gonna have a party at his place. Too bad he won’t be able to toast with us,” Ajax said with a bitter laugh. “This shit is going sideways fast.”

“What did I miss?” I asked as my attention went back to the TVs on the wall.

“What do you see that I don’t?” Preacher asked.

“Look at the ceiling tile above the end of aisle four,” Ajax ordered.

“Oh, shit,” I whispered when I saw the gap between the two acoustic tiles. “How the hell did Donner get up there?”

Shorty, who was pretending to stock inventory directly beneath Donner, touched the

earbud in his ear, and the phone on the desk beeped before he whispered, “Batman has left the chat, but Spider-Man is here to save the day.”

“I swear to God, that man has no sense of self-preservation,” Ajax muttered as Diablo and his four friends, one of whom had a bandage on his arm, turned around and walked out of the grocery store.

“They’re on their way out,” I warned Chewie. “Is everyone prepared? Lurk, what are you doing?”

“I’m baking a goddamn cake, Navy. What do you think I’m doing?” Lurk snapped, out of breath and obviously on the move. There was a loud explosion, and then Lurk laughed like a crazy person before he said, “Okay, I’m not doing anything now . What’s up?”

“Devolving.”

D ALI

“I am so glad we got to spend the day together,” I told Jodie as we walked out of our third thrift store of the day. “I haven’t gotten to do this in ages.”

“I can’t believe you made me go shopping after our pedicures. Don’t you know that after a foot rub, you’re supposed to chill out? All of this walking has taken away every bit of my relaxation vibe.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“Damn sure is,” Jodie argued as she looked down at her feet. “Poor babies. They need a break.”

“They look cute, though.”

“They do. Maybe I should become a foot model. I hear that’s quite a lucrative market if you know what you’re doing.”

“Or maybe you should not sell pictures of yourself to perverts,” I suggested.

“That’s what I need to find.”

“A pervert?”

“A guy with a foot fetish. I bet he’d rub my feet any time I ask.”

“Rub one out on your feet, maybe,” I muttered as I opened the back passenger door of Navy’s truck. I hefted my shopping bag onto the floorboard and then reached for Jodie’s bag. “I can’t believe we found that set of rice bowls.”

“I can’t believe you bought a fucking karaoke machine,” Jodie grumbled. Again .

“Aunt Ligaya mentioned that something happened to the one she had and she wanted another one so that when your dad gets out of the hospital, they can sing together.”

“It broke for a reason, Dalisay.”

“You broke her karaoke machine?”

“If I hear either of the aunts sing another Journey song, I am going to throw myself off the top floor of a building to see if I bounce.”

“Well, I’m gonna have to take that risk because I’m giving her the machine in the hopes that she’ll make me some lumpia. Do you know how long it’s been since I had good lumpia?”

“I had some yesterday,” Jodie bragged.

“What about adobo?”

“Okay, give her the machine and the rice bowls.”

“That’s what I thought,” I sassed as I slammed the truck door. “Get in, woman. I need coffee.”

“I thought your boyfriend said we needed to make ourselves scarce today.”

“He did, but I know some of his friends are there with the aunts, so I’m sure it will be okay for us to drop in for a few minutes.”

“Maybe you should call and let him know . . .”

“I don’t need permission to visit my family, Jodie.”

“I’m not saying you do. I’m just suggesting that maybe you should listen when he says to make yourself scarce for a while.”

“I’m lucky he didn’t send one of the guys with us for the day. Can you imagine how they would have reacted when we took them into the salon?”

“That might have been worth putting up with one of them for at least a little while,” Jodie admitted. “He’s got some really hot friends.”

“They’re not as handsome as Navy.”

“God, you’re so smitten that it makes me want to puke.”

“Shut up and get in the truck, Jodie. You’re just jealous because I have a multi-orgasm glow.”

“I’m going to tell the aunts that you’re too nervous to sing karaoke by yourself so you need to go with them every time.”

“That’s just mean.”

“You started it.”

???

“I wonder why the sign says they’re closed,” Jodie said as we pulled into the parking lot. “I wonder whose car that is.”

“It looks pretty clean already. It probably belongs to one of Navy’s friends. I bet those motorcycles do too.”

Jodie rolled her eyes before she said, “I don’t think so.”

“Why not? That green one is pretty.”

“Your guy wouldn’t be caught dead on one of those. As a matter of fact, he probably doesn’t even call them motorcycles.”

“They’ve got two wheels. That makes them motorcycles.”

“I’ve got two tits, and that doesn’t make me a supermodel.”

I put the truck in park and stared at my cousin for a second, trying my best to wrap my head around her comparison. I asked, “Did they give you a lobotomy when you were locked up?”

“Fuck off,” Jodie said as she hopped out of the truck.

I had to do the same thing since, at my height, there was no other way for me to get out of the damn thing.

I’d finally learned how to get in without too much trouble, but getting out of it without taking my life into my hands had eluded me so far.

Jodie must have been feeling the same way because she turned around and looked at me through the cab before she said, “Did he buy this truck at the big and tall shop?”

Jeez.”

Just to irritate her, I said, “His truck isn’t the only extra large thing he’s got going for him.”

Jodie stepped back and slammed the door, and I shut mine and laughed on the walk around the truck. By the time I got to the passenger side, she had the back door open and had just pulled one of the bags out when she tilted her head and asked, “Did you hear that?”

“What?” I asked as I looked around. “It was probably just a car backfiring.”

“Weren’t you in the military?” Jodie asked as she thrust one of the bags my way.

“You know I was.”

“Didn’t they teach you the difference between a shitty exhaust system and gunfire?”

“Or maybe I’m not paranoid and hearing things that don’t . . .” I looked around again and said, “Those were definitely gunshots.”

“C’mon. Let’s get inside before we become a statistic.” Jodie and I hurried along the sidewalk, and I bumped into her back when she stopped abruptly at the front door. “It’s locked.”

“That’s weird.”

“Come on. Let’s get back in the truck. Something feels off.”

“You’re right,” I said as I turned around and hurried back toward Navy’s truck.

I put the bag on the floor in the back on my side of the truck just as Jodie did the same on the passenger side.

I had just managed to crawl into the passenger seat when I heard my cousin scream and then tumble into the back seat.

As I turned to look at her, I asked, “What the hell?”

I didn’t even see Jodie because I couldn’t get past the barrel of the gun that was pointed right at my face. I froze in place until the man holding it yelled, “Drive!”

I twisted around in the seat and reached for the button to start the truck before I realized that was exactly what I shouldn’t do.

“Never let them take you to a secondary location,” I muttered as I let my hand drop.

In Tagalog, Jodie yelled, “Do what he says for now. As soon as I get a chance, I’m going to snap his fucking neck!”

“Shut the fuck up!” the man screamed, almost hysterical.

Jodie started stammering in Tagalog, pretending she didn’t speak English, so I played along and did the same.

“Drive the fucking truck!” he screamed.

I hit the button for the ignition, and the second I threw it into reverse, I saw two men behind the truck. I had no choice but to slam on my brakes unless I wanted to hit them, but instead of coming to our aid, they jumped into the back of the truck and disappeared.

“Go!Go!Go!”

In Tagalog, I yelled, “There are two men in the bed!”

The man jabbed me in the ribs with his gun before ordering me to drive again, so I hit the gas, hoping to throw him off-balance and give Jodie a chance to get the upper hand.

I wasn’t sure how she could, though, considering that every method of protection we’d been trained on included moving quickly to get out of our opponent’s reach.

There wasn’t room for either of us to make any space, and I worried that we might not ever get a chance if he didn’t calm down.

“Turn at the light!” I put my blinker on and slowed to get into the left lane. The man frantically started yelling, “Turn right!”

Feigning innocence, I kept moving toward the inside lane and could almost swear I heard Jodie laughing before she said in Tagalog, “I think you’re enjoying this way too much.”

“I know you speak English, bitch!” the man yelled as he cuffed me on the side of my head with his free hand.

“Oh! You don’t speak Tagalog?” I asked innocently as I stared at him in the rearview mirror.

Suddenly, I realized that I’d met this man before.

The crazed look in his eyes and his flushed face gave him a completely different appearance than the arrogant asshole I’d met just a few days ago.

Just to push him a little further, I said, “My bad.”

This time, Jodie didn’t even try to hide her laughter. My gaze shot to the man’s reflection in the rearview mirror when his head snapped to the side. There was a loud thump and then glass shattered, and I managed to pull the gun out of the man’s grip as his hand slowly slid down.

“Weak ass men think that women are weak,” Jodie said angrily as someone behind me started honking. “I need something to tie him up with.”

“I don’t have anything.”

“Ah-ha!” Jodie exclaimed loudly as the person behind us honked again.

I checked the oncoming traffic and waited just a little longer before I whipped a bitch and went back in the opposite direction.

I heard the man groan as Jodie laughed maniacally, and when I glanced over my shoulder, I saw her yanking the cord out of the back of the gently used but brand new to me karaoke machine I’d just purchased.

When it popped free, she yelled, “Got it!”

“You owe me a karaoke machine!” I snapped as she grunted and groaned, pulling the man’s hands behind his back. I couldn’t see what she was doing, but she was still laughing like a crazy person as I cut across oncoming traffic and jumped the curb to get us into the car wash parking lot.

“Woohoo! Journey!” Jodie yelled before she started singing one of their most popular songs as the truck skidded to a halt in front of the doors.

Before she even finished the first line of the lyrics, a man I didn't recognize appeared in my peripheral vision and I let out a blood curdling scream. Without thinking, I hit the gas again and was shocked when he grabbed the side mirror and held onto the outside of my door.

He was yelling something, but I was still shrieking in terror and couldn't hear him. I sideswiped the pretty motorcycle I had admired earlier to try and peel him off the truck, but the man held on. I was even more afraid when I realized that he wasn't screaming.

The man was laughing.

"Stop the goddamn truck, Ninja!"

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:39 am

I recognized that voice and that nickname, so I slammed on the brakes.

The man holding onto the mirror beside me went flying just as I heard a loud thump on the roof.

Suddenly, Donner, the same man I'd tied up just a few days ago, flipped over the windshield and landed on his stomach across the hood.

There were a few long seconds when it felt like he and I were the only two people left in the world as he stared at me with murder in his eyes. Without even blinking, I slid my left hand down the side of the steering wheel and hit the lever just behind it.

"Aargh!" the man screamed as wiper fluid sprayed into his face, and I burst out laughing when the windshield wiper smacked him on the chin.

Jodie was laughing maniacally again, and I wondered if I'd somehow lost touch with reality. There was an unconscious man on the floorboard behind me and a crazy biker sprawled on the asphalt a few feet away, laughing like a loon at the angry man sprawled across the hood of the truck.

"I'm really not sure what's going on right now," I admitted.

"I don't know either, but I haven't laughed this hard in years."

Another man I didn't recognize ran outside and waved me toward a car wash bay. I turned off the wipers so I could see to drive, although it was difficult to maneuver the big truck with a very large man cursing at me on the hood.

Once we were inside, the door dropped down behind us. I shut the truck off before I twisted around to look in the back.

“Is he still out?” I asked.

“No, I’m just trying to get into this foot fetish thing we talked about earlier.”

“By stepping on his face?” I asked. “What the hell, Jodie?”

“At least I took my shoe off first, right?”

???

NAVY

“Shit! No no no no no!” I yelled as I jumped up from my seat behind the desk.

“Well, fuck!” Ajax said, just as shocked as I was to see Dali and Jodie walking toward the door of the car wash. “Calm down. The guys will take care of it. We can’t go running off half-cocked.”

“Fuck that! She’s not supposed to be here,” I whispered frantically as I scrambled to pick up the burner so I could alert the guys.

I was still looking down when I heard Ajax gasp and then let out a string of curses. I looked back at the screen in time to see Dali hop into the front seat of my truck just as Diablo picked up her cousin and tossed her into the back before he crawled in after her.

Luckily, no one in the truck seemed to notice when Donner and Lurk crawled into the bed of my truck and laid down right before Dali took off out of the parking lot.

I was running out the front door, hoping I had a chance to wave her down, not even sure if that was the right thing to do, when she pulled a U-turn in the middle of the intersection and took off back toward the car wash.

Ajax was right beside me as I ran toward my motorcycle, and within seconds, we were weaving in and out of traffic on our way to catch my truck.

I was riding the line between cars while I waited for traffic to clear enough for me to shoot across the intersection when I saw Dali jump the curb and go back to the car wash.

“Calm down! They’ve got her!” Ajax yelled over the hood of the car between us. He pointed toward the car wash before he yelled, “Look!”

I looked up just in time to see my truck slide into the bay and the big metal door slam down behind it. I was finally able to take a deep breath - my first since I saw her take off with the man we were hunting in the seat behind her.

Finally the light turned green, and Ajax and I shot forward, leaving the rest of the traffic behind us. I barely took the time to put down the kickstand before I got off the bike and headed into the building, terrified of what I might find but hopeful that Dali was okay.

Even if she was injured, at least she was in my brothers’ hands. They’d take care of her until I could. I had no doubt about that.

What I found as I rushed through the office toward the side door that led out into the wash area was absolute chaos.

Donner was bent in half, spraying his face with a hose, Lurk was sitting on his ass next to Jodie, laughing like a maniac, and Dalisay was seated behind the wheel with a

shell-shocked expression. I hurried over and yanked the door open before I reached in and pulled her into my arms.

“Dali, baby, are you okay?”

“I think I just got kidnapped.”

“What?”

“No, I know I just got kidnapped. Jodie worked on her foot fetish, but he bit it and made her scream, and Donner thinks he might be blind. Even if he is, he’s still gonna kill me.”

“Uh huh,” I murmured, understanding that Dali was in shock and probably didn’t even realize she was babbling. “It’s okay, babe.”

“That asshole pointed a gun at me!”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No, but he bit Jodie. She’s probably got rabies.”

“Uh huh.”

“Why do you keep saying that? Are you in shock?”

“Are you?”

“No! I’m perfectly fine, but the majority of your friends are certifiable and there’s a pile of mostly dead men over there,” Dali said as she pointed somewhere behind me. Before I had a chance to look, she whispered, “I’m sorry I fucked up your truck!”

“What?”

“I was trying to scrape the laughing guy off the door before I figured out he was one of your friends. I may have run him into a motorcycle.”

“Huh?”

Dali reached up and patted my cheek aggressively before she said, “Focus, Navy!” I didn’t have time to react before she looked to the side and said, “Someone get him a chair. I think he’s in shock.”

“I’m not in shock! I was fucking terrified that you were terrified, and now you’re rambling on about fetishes and rabies! And I don’t give a flying fuck about my truck. I just want to know if you’re okay.”

“There’s a stack of men over there bleeding out into the floor drain, Navy!” Dali yelled.

“Fuck them! I don’t care about them, Dali; I’m worried about you!”

“I’m fucking fine!”

“That means she’s really not fine,” Ajax said from somewhere behind me. “And when they say it like that, it means you should probably shut the fuck up.”

When Dali nodded, I lost it and pulled her closer so I could wrap my arms around her. I had only been that terrified once before and spent seven years in prison afterwards. Right now, I’d walk over hot coals and spend another seven years locked up as long as she was okay.

Dali squirmed out of my hold and looked up at me before she whispered, “I have a

feeling that tonight is going to be one of those nights when you disappear without giving me any details.”

“Probably.”

“If that’s the case, I think I’m going to hang out with Jodie and make sure she doesn’t start foaming at the mouth, okay?”

“As long as you’re home when I get there, you can do anything you want.”

“Good. Because I think I really need a glass of wine. Possibly an entire bottle.”

“Drink as much as you want. I’ll carry you to bed when I get home.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

N AVY

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to survive this falling in love shit,” I admitted. Chewie picked up a man’s foot, and I grabbed the other so we could drag him to the van that Ajax had procured somehow. “I’m not sure my heart can take another scare like I had today.”

“I have a feeling that every day with that woman is going to be an adventure. Especially if her cousin is involved. I think she may be a little bit . . . unhinged.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked as we hefted the unconscious man into the van. He landed on one of his buddies, and they both groaned through the duck tape covering their mouths as we turned around to go get another of their cohorts. “She’s been through a lot.”

“She was instant besties with Lurk.”

“I consider Lurk a good friend. Thank god because I know what kind of enemy he would be.”

“Preach it,” Chewie said with a shudder. “It was just odd how they took to each other so easily. Did you hear that they made plans to go dancing this weekend?”

“Lurk can dance?”

“I don’t fucking know,” Chewie said in exasperation. “It’s more that he made plans to go out in public, on purpose, with no nefarious reason other than to get his groove

on.”

As Shorty dragged a man toward the van, I asked, “Did you check him?”

“Nothing on this one,” Shorty assured me. “What the fuck are we going to do with these guys once we get them loaded up?”

“I don’t know,” Chewie answered.

“Other than the fact that they drive shitty bikes and dress like Hollywood douchebags, what do we really have on them?” Shorty asked as he walked toward us after dumping the guy next to the van.

As Chewie started emptying the next guy’s pockets, I checked his hands and shouted when I found what I was looking for.

As I tugged it off his finger, I said, “Well, this motherfucker beat the shit out of my dad and stole his wedding ring.”

“Fuck it. Kill him,” Shorty said as he bent over to check another man. “I wish we had more information on the rest of them, though.”

“That would have been easier to figure out if Lurk hadn’t blown up their clubhouse,” I mused.

“He didn’t. He blew up their shop. The clubhouse is still standing. There were people inside, so he didn’t detonate that one. He was going to wait until he was sure it was empty first,” Chewie explained.

“It’s not going to be empty once we put all these worthless fuckers inside it, but I still don’t think he’ll push the button.”

I saw Ajax walking toward us and held up my father's ring. "Found it!"

"Hell yeah! Clark's gonna be happy about that." Ajax laughed before he said, "Lurk and I took a minute to get to know one of the tattooed douchebags, and he was nice enough to give us the history of their little motorcycle club."

"They're an official club?" I asked.

"Not so much official as stupid."

As I started dragging the guy who had the ring on his finger toward the van, I said, "Look at 'em. I could have told you that."

"It's a little more in-depth than how they look, man."

"I don't give a fuck who they are. This asshole attacked my father and then stole from him. He's lucky I don't chop his fucking hands off for that."

"They're a gamer club."

"What's that?" Shorty asked.

Ajax scratched his head before he explained, "They're a bunch of gamers who met online and then got together at a convention where they . . . What's it called when they dress up like their favorite characters?"

"Cosplay?" I asked in shock.

"Yeah! That's it! Anyway, they all met up in Vegas, got hammered, and then went to a tattoo shop to get matching ink. While they were hanging out, they came up with the grand idea to move to Oceanside and start a club, using one of their grandpa's

storage buildings for their clubhouse.”

“What?” me, Shorty, and Chewie asked in unison.

“This Diablo asshole found one of them online - which is something I’m going to investigate, considering what we know about his disgusting proclivities, and he became their de facto leader.”

“You’re fucking with me, right?”

“Some people really get lost in certain games.” Shorty laughed before he said, “I think this might go above and beyond, though. Why the hell did they start shaking down businesses? What’s that about?”

“They watched way too many movies,” Chewie answered sadly. “Poor kids weren’t even living in reality.”

“Kids? This asshole is at least my age!” I yelled.

“Their clocks aren’t wound tight enough,” Shorty explained.

Ajax chuckled before he said, “Even their club name is based on a video game.”

“You’re fucking kidding,” I hissed as I glared down at the man at my feet. “They were playing a game?”

“Yep. However, I think their gamer days are over now.”

“Goddamn right, they are!” I said angrily before I kicked the man who’d hit my father.

As he groaned loudly, Ajax said, “We can’t have their leader, and we have to leave the rest of them at their clubhouse.”

“So Lurk can make it go boom?” Shorty asked.

“No, so the real club who runs shit around here can chat with them.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.” Ajax winced before he said, “Boss talked to their chapter president, and these nerds were already on his radar. When he found out they were trying to shake people down, including his great aunt who owns a convenience store down the way, he was pissed .”

“So, to make peace, we have to hand them over.”

“Yep,” Ajax answered.

“It would be more humane if we took care of the problem ourselves,” Chewie said sadly.

Suddenly, Ajax had become a man of few words and repeated, “Yep.”

“What about that Diablo douchebag?” I asked.

“They’re coming to pick him up themselves. They want him as an insurance policy. This new mayor has aspirations that far exceed being the mayor of this piece of the state. My guess is that they’re going to use that to their advantage.”

“Do you think they’ll leave him alive?” Donner asked.

“Doubtful,” Chewie scoffed.

“I think they will just so they’ve got some ammunition against the mayor if his dreams of holding higher office happen to come true.”

“That means we can get to him in the future,” I said cheerfully.

“Well, good! At least there’s a partially happy ending to the story,” Shorty cheered.

“Lurk wants to do one while he’s here,” Ajax warned.

“No!” I shook my head before I said, “He’ll go off the rails and change shit up. We can’t do that. Each one is exactly the same every single time. That helps to throw off the scent for the cops since the same crime has happened all over the place.”

“I know, but I’m not really sure how to tell a man like Lurk no.”

“Talk to him while he’s out dancing with the crazy girl,” Chewie suggested.

“Lurk’s going dancing?” Ajax asked.

“I know, right?”

“I’m kind of worried. He’s not been himself lately.”

“Maybe he’s just ready for a change,” I suggested.

Ajax laughed before he said, “He might be, but I’m not sure the world is.”

“I’ll talk to him before he leaves,” I promised.

“I asked Donner to feel him out too,” Ajax informed me. “He’s hanging out with him now while they watch over your girl and her fun cousin.”

“I think I love her,” Shorty announced. “She’s perfect for me.”

“I guess she’s going to be part of the package if I want Dali in my life, but I’m sure having her around is going to bring some adventure to my boring life.”

The guys laughed along with me before Chewie said, “Yeah. Living in a condo on the beach while you play on your computer and plan the demise of predators is sooo boring.”

“It’s a burden, but I think I’ll manage.”

???

NAVY

The metal chair made a horrible noise as I dragged it across the concrete floor, and when I saw the prick flinch at the sound, I began walking even slower. By the time I’d gotten the chair set up in front of him, the sound was grating on my nerves too.

“Jerry . . . Can I call you Jerry?” I asked sarcastically. He moaned beneath his gag, and I said, “We need to talk about your future.”

He started bucking around in the chair, and I frowned as I shook my head.

When he didn’t stop, I reached over and slapped the side of his head, making sure to hit his ear that had just recently stopped bleeding after Jodie tried to rip it off while they wrestled in the back seat.

His head whipped back with the force of the hit, and he groaned before he looked back at me.

“Hush!” I snapped before I lifted my hand again. When he stayed quiet, I said, “Thank you.”

I took a moment to gather my thoughts before I said, “Now, your future hangs in the balance. I know what I want to do to you, and honestly, I can’t even imagine what the other guys are going to do to you.

Unfortunately, it’s out of my hands. They couldn’t promise me they’d let you live, but if you do, I’m going to visit you someday so we can have another little chat.

Until then, I am going to have to insist that you forget all about who you saw today and how you got injured.

I need you to develop amnesia when it comes to any detail about today or even the last week.

You picking up what I’m putting down, Diablo ? ”

He hurriedly nodded, and I sighed before I said, “I really, really wish I could be in charge of punishing you for your stupidity. That’s really what it was, after all.”

The asshole who had been so smarmy before had now turned into a sniveling lump of bruises. Even though that was nice to see, it just wasn’t enough to sate my thirst for vengeance. I knew what this man did when he surfed the internet, and the majority of it had nothing to do with online gaming.

However, I didn’t want to show my hand in case the MC that was on its way to pick him up happened to let him go free.

I doubted that would be the case, but on the off chance it was, I wanted to surprise him some dark night by appearing like an apparition in the doorway, there to change his life in ways that he could have never imagined.

“They’ll be here any minute.”

I glanced over at Ajax and said, “I know.”

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Just to hedge my bets in the hopes that they left him alive for me to come for later, I leaned closer to the man and whispered, “They know your brother is the mayor, so you may want to lean into that. I’m sure that information would go a long way toward your ability to breathe and walk upright in the future .

. . especially since our illustrious mayor seems like a shoe-in for higher office.

If you tell them that you’ve got an in and can help ease the way for their club, my guess is that they’ll go to your brother with an offer.

If you haven’t managed to make him hate you as much as all of us do, he might be able to get them to let you live. ”

“You’re going soft in your old age, man,” Donner complained.

“I’ve got my reasons.”

“It was very kindhearted of you to remind him that he should use his brother’s political aspirations to his advantage,” Chewie said thoughtfully.

“I know, right?”

I heard motorcycles outside and glanced at the bay door before I looked back to the man in the chair.

“I can’t say I wish you well when I really hope that karma fucks you in the ass with a cactus, so I guess this is goodbye.”

The man started squealing again, and I sighed before I stood up, ready to get this piece of trash out of the way so we could clean up this place before any more of Dali's family appeared. Hopefully, her aunts followed instructions better than Dali and Jodie, but I didn't have much faith.

I knew that the other guys were hidden away around the car wash to protect our backs in case this went sideways, but I was still nervous about the meeting.

Just because we were ex-cons didn't mean we were fearless.

If anything, we were probably more cautious than most because we had encountered monsters out in the world and been locked up with plenty of them during our incarceration.

The men we were meeting with this evening didn't just tiptoe around the boundaries of the law, they were proud to flaunt that they stayed on the other side of it.

They weren't afraid to commit all sorts of crimes, including an ambush.

Our men knew that and were wary of theirs, but dealing with men like this came with the territory.

Time Served MC may have been based in Tenillo, but there were Nomads like me all over the country, which meant that we didn't have protection in numbers if the men of this club decided they wanted to start some shit.

The MC who wanted Diablo the Douche had chapters all over the world and numbers larger than our club could ever imagine.

Keeping things peaceful with them was important to our survival, both as a club and as living, breathing men.

“Ajax!” the president of the local chapter said happily as he walked in behind two of his men. “I haven’t seen you in years.”

I could tell that Ajax was shocked, but he masked it well and greeted the man like an old friend.

I quickly realized that Ajax had served time with this guy, and from their respectful greeting, it seemed as if they may have even been friends.

That was great, considering how many men had accompanied him today.

“It makes me feel better to know that we’re handing this fucking douchebag over to someone who knows how to take care of business,” Ajax said with a forced smile.

“I’m going to talk to him and then see about having a conversation with his brother.”

“The mayor. He’s got family in low places. No wonder he’s such a schmuck.”

“Exactly. Unfortunately, you can’t choose who shares your blood, and the grandparents tend to get sad when you try to kill off the weak ones.”

That was probably the most demented thing I’d heard in a while. Considering who my friends were, that was saying something.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take the others with you? You can even have the van they’re in if you want.”

“When did you become so generous?”

“I’ve had a long fucking day, and the sooner we get rid of those fools, the sooner I can go home.”

“Thanks for taking care of the problem. I hope the ones you came here to protect are all okay.”

“They will be,” Ajax assured them.

“I guess we’ll take them and the van,” he decided. He motioned toward the man still tied to the chair before he asked, “Do you mind if we take this chair too?”

“Go for it,” Ajax replied with a shrug. A few of the men picked up the chair, tossed it into the back of the van on top of the other guys, and then slammed the door on their screams of pain. “Keys are in the ignition. Toss the plates when you’re finished.”

“Of course,” the man assured Ajax before they said their goodbyes and shook hands. Once the bay door was open, one of the men, a younger one who I assumed was a prospect, drove out of the building, followed by Ajax’s old buddy and his men.

Without another word, they were on their bikes and pulling out of the parking lot in pairs, some ahead of the van and others behind it.

“That went so much better than I expected,” Ajax admitted before he blew out a relieved breath. “Fuck! I’m too old for this much stress.”

“I guess I’ll keep an eye on things to see if the douchebag lives and then give it a little time and visit him myself.”

“Unfortunately, even if you bump him down the list, there are plenty more to take his place.”

“Ain’t that the truth?”

“Let’s get this cleaned up and head over to your place for some cold beer. I’m

parched, exhausted, and I need to call my old lady and apologize for being a fucking slob.”

“It’s good that you’ve seen the light,” Chewie said as he came out of the shadows with Shorty close behind him. “An apology goes a long way, but my guess is picking your shit up without having to be asked would go even further.”

“He’s got a good point. Actions speak louder than words.”

Ajax rolled his eyes before he looked at me and said, “You’ve had a girlfriend for all of four hours, and that bastard has been single forever. Excuse me if I don’t take your advice to heart.”

Shorty chuckled before he said, “You’re just pissed that they’re right.”

D ALI

“I think today will go down as the wildest adventure we’ve ever had together.”

“Considering almost all of the others consisted of us lying to our parents about where we were and then getting drunk somewhere dangerous, only to wake up the next morning and wonder who let us chew on cat litter and where we lost our left shoe, I’d say that you’re right.

Today was a grand adventure that I’d rather not ever try to top,” I admitted.

“You’re much calmer about this than I ever thought you would be.”

“You imagined a scenario where we got carjacked by a madman with a gun?” I asked.

Jodie shrugged before she admitted, “I always imagine worst-case scenarios.”

“I think this definitely falls into that genre.”

“See? You’re way too calm.”

“What should I be doing? Screaming, fainting, throwing up?”

“You already threw up twice.” When I glared at her, she winced before she said, “Sorry. I forgot I wasn’t supposed to ever mention that.”

“What do you think they’re doing to those men?” I asked.

“That’s probably also something we shouldn’t ever talk about.”

“No one can hear us up here,” I reminded her.

“Even so, the less chatter about it and the less assumptions we make, the better. It’s not good if we get the facts muddled with what ifs and end up having to lie on the stand.

” I couldn’t do more than stare at her speechlessly when I realized she was right.

If things didn’t go well today, we could end up having to testify in court to God only knows what, and then what would I do?

As if she could read my mind, Jodie said, “I hope it never comes to that, because if Anthony finds out what a good liar you are, he may never trust you again.”

“I’m not that good at it!”

“You lied to the priest’s face at least a dozen times that I know of.”

“I didn’t really lie ; he just didn’t ask the right questions.”

“And what about that time you lied to those cops?”

“Again, it was the way they worded the questions.”

“That’s just semantics. It doesn’t excuse the fact that you’re so damn good at lying.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“Really? As if.”

“Maybe if you’d been better at lying, you would have gotten away with murder.”

“I didn’t even try!”

“I never understood your reasoning behind that.”

“Why would I pretend I didn’t do something that he deserved? He hit my little girl, Dalisay!”

“Don’t ‘Dalisay’ me, Jodie !” I threw my hands up in exasperation before I asked, “How did we even get started on this topic?”

“We were trying to take our mind off the fact that your new boyfriend and his friends are probably dissolving a body in a tub of acid right now.”

I looked at her in horror and asked, “What is wrong with you?”

“I think that makes more sense than burying someone. With acid, when it’s gone, it’s gone, but with burial, some weirdo looking for dinosaur bones in ten years might dig up the remains that the cops can use to get DNA evidence.

” When I just stared at her, she shrugged and said, “Either option is better than water because everyone knows that shit doesn’t work. ”

“You’ve given a lot of thought to those options, haven’t you?”

“An industrial wood chipper to make the problem into mulch is the most ecologically-friendly solution, but the smell would give you away.”

“That’s it. You’re grounded from anything having to do with true crime.”

“I’m too old for you to ground me.”

“Maybe, but if you ever start gardening, I’m going to have some serious questions.”

When I heard a motorcycle approaching, I got up and rushed over to the edge of the roof. When it turned out to be someone else just riding by, I sighed and turned around to go back to my seat. When I looked over at Jodie, she wasn’t even trying to hide her amusement.

“What?”

“Girl, you’ve got it bad.”

“Shut up.”

“And it’s not just because you’re worried about what he’s doing, it’s because you’ve been away from him for a couple of hours and you’re not sure how much longer you can make it.”

“I’m not that bad.”

“I’m not knocking it, Dali. In fact, I may be a little jealous.”

“You’ll find a good guy. I know it,” I assured her. As I reached for my wine glass, I teased, “I saw you getting friendly with his friend from . . . Where is that guy from anyway?”

“Lurk? He lives in the mountains.” Jodie frowned before she said, “Although, I’m not sure which mountains. He’s kind of mysterious, isn’t he?”

“That is one way to describe him, I suppose.”

“He’s cute too.”

“Should I be worried about how easy it was for Navy to gather up a bunch of like-minded friends to do . . . whatever it is they’re doing right now?”

“I wouldn’t say you should be worried as much as cautious.”

“He said that there might be some times when he’s gone for a while and can’t tell me anything about it.”

“That doesn’t sound illegal at all!”

I frowned at my cousin before I said, “Your sarcasm doesn’t help the situation.”

“Sorry,” Jodie said, although she was still smiling and didn’t look at all apologetic. “I guess since I’ve been in trouble before, I look at things in a different light. He’s going out, probably late at night, and doing something nefarious. Am I right?”

“The first night I spent at his place, he left me sleeping in bed and was gone for probably four or five hours.”

“Were you awake when he came back?”

“That’s when I met the first group of his friends.”

Jodie giggled before she said, “When you hog-tied the grumpy one.”

“Exactly.”

“When he came back, was he sober?”

“Yep. His eyes were clear, there was no smell of alcohol, nothing.”

“But you checked?”

I sighed before I admitted, “Not on purpose, but yes.”

“Okay, I can’t fault you for that. If anything, you should be commended for not going in with blinders on. So, he came home sober after a few hours.”

“Right.”

“And you have no idea what he was doing?”

“None at all.”

“I overheard him mention that the fucker who tried to kidnap us was on some sort of list.”

“I did too.”

Jodie leaned her head back and looked at the darkening sky for a bit before she asked, “What does Navy do for a living?”

“Computer stuff. Websites, um . . . things like that.”

“He found Corrie by going online and tracking down the pervert she was talking to, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“So, we know he’s got a grudge against anyone who messes with kids online.”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“Maybe he’s doing some vigilante shit or something. Or maybe he’s working at a fucking soup kitchen! At this point, I’m not sure why it makes a difference.”

“I’m worried that because it’s so easy for him to break the law that he might end up back in prison.”

“Dali, I’m a felon. I always will be. When I get pulled over for speeding and they run my tags and find out that the owner of that vehicle is a violent offender, they will approach my car as if I’m armed and dangerous.

And you know what? I don’t blame the cops for feeling like that.

When I was locked up, I met women who terrified me, and they considered me their friend.

If I get pulled over by a cautious cop, he’s gonna check every box to make sure I’m not breaking the law. ”

“Okay,” I said hesitantly, not sure where she was going with her story.

“We stopped at the liquor store, and on the ride over here, the stuff we bought was on the floor between my feet. You stopped at a dispensary where you used your medical card and then came out to the truck carrying a baggie full of shit I’m not supposed to be around and then tossed it on the floor with the liquor .

. . which I’m also not supposed to be around. ”

“What do you mean?”

“If you had been pulled over, the cops would have asked for my ID since I’m a passenger. They would have figured out who I am and that I’m on parole, and they could have taken me in on at least two violations.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I’m not telling you this to give you shit, Dali. I’m just saying that we were having a normal reaction to a really fucked-up situation, and I didn’t even think about it until that cop pulled up next to us at the red light.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not explaining myself very well. Navy knows what will keep him out of prison, but he also knows that it’s a slippery slope. If he’s doing something that could risk his freedom, it must be something that he believes in with all his heart that makes him more than willing to take that chance.”

“You’re probably right.”

“If that’s the case, I bet you’ll be the supportive girlfriend who is waiting at the door for him when he gets home, and if asked, you’ll use that superior ability to lie with a straight face to make sure he’s protected if he ever gets caught.”

“What do you think he’s doing?”

“I think he’s punishing people in a way that fits their crime rather than relying on the courts to take years to give them a slap on the wrist.”

“For doing what?”

Jodie shook her head as she said, “Nope. If I’m right, I’m not ratting him out. You’ll either figure it out yourself, ask him directly, or get the fuck over it. I have a feeling that all three things are going to happen - and probably in that order.”

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When I sent Navy a text asking him if he had any idea when he and his friends might be home, I was happy to hear that it would be much sooner than I’d imagined. And I was also glad there was something that I could do while I waited other than sit and drink wine.

Since Jodie and I had Navy’s truck, we went to the store and estimated what we’d need to feed a crowd of men - and then doubled it because we had no idea if we were right.

As soon as we got back to Navy’s, we got to work, peeling and chopping vegetables, marinating meat, and all the other things that cooking for a large group required.

As requested, Navy sent me a text when they were about thirty minutes out, so I hurried to put the main course on the stove while Jodie assembled the sides and put dessert in the oven. By the time Navy and his friends arrived, we were a sweaty mess, but then again, so were they.

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Obviously, we'd all been working, but on very different things.

I looked around at the sweaty men and suggested, "Let's all shower and then reconvene here in about thirty minutes," I suggested.

"Thank God," Ajax muttered before he gave me a salute and turned to leave Navy's apartment. "I call dibs on the first shower."

"You cooked dinner?" Navy asked.

"Yes, Jodie and I cooked for you guys. The main course can simmer while we get cleaned up, and everything will be ready to eat by the time we're finished."

"I'm going to borrow some of your clothes and use the guest bathroom," Jodie said as she walked off toward Navy's bedroom.

Suddenly, Navy and I were alone in the kitchen, and I looked around before I asked, "Wanna shower together?"

"Fuck yes!" Navy growled as he swept me into his arms and carried me toward the bedroom.

Jodie saw us laughing and walked out, rolling her eyes before she said, "Try to keep your antics down to a dull roar, and remember that we're in a time crunch. I'm starving."

"Yes, ma'am," Navy said cheerfully.

“Horny assholes,” Jodie said as she stomped toward the spare bedroom.

“You’re just jealous!”

“Damn right!”

I was still laughing when Navy kicked the door closed behind us and made his way across the main bedroom toward the bath. I had jokingly told him more than once that I had decided to move into his condo because of this bathroom I’d fallen in love with at first sight.

That wasn’t really why, but it was a really great bathroom.

The shower was glass with built-in benches on either end - one beneath a rainfall shower, and the other beneath the shower wand. In the few nights that we’d spent together so far, we somehow always ended up in the shower, and I enjoyed it every single time.

Just like I knew I would enjoy this one

As soon as he set me on my feet, I pulled my T-shirt off and tossed it aside.

By the time I had shimmied out of my leggings and underwear, he was naked.

He bent forward to give me a kiss, and I wrapped my arms around his neck.

Instead of ending the kiss to move, he lifted me up and held me flush against his body as he walked us into the shower.

When my back hit the cold tiles, I gasped but didn’t let go of him.

I just wrapped my legs around his waist as he reached over and turned on the water.

One of the perks of his state of the art bathroom was the programmable temperature control and the tankless water heater on the wall in the closet nearby. Within just a few seconds, the temperature was perfect, and he turned us so we were beneath the rainfall and kissed me again and again.

As much as I loved it when he took the time, all I could think about was how many people were probably already waiting for us in the kitchen and my chicken was still simmering on the stove.

“Get out of your head,” Navy murmured close to my ear.

“I would if you’d get inside my pussy,” I said snarkily before I nipped at his neck. “A girl could get old and gray waiting on you to . . .”

My voice trailed off into a long moan when he entered me in one thrust, but he was the one gasping for air when I used my legs to lift up and then let myself fall down again.

I did this over and over until my legs started shaking.

Navy pressed me against the wall and held me there so he could take over, and all thoughts of anything other than the way our bodies fit together and the feel of his mouth on mine disappeared.

When I finally cleared my mind and let go of my worries, I was able to focus on the way he made my body feel.

I trusted him to hold me up, so I let go of his neck with one hand and put it between us so I could touch myself while he fucked me.

That was all it took. Within just a few minutes, I exploded into a million pieces.

The only thing tethering me to the earth was Navy.

He must have been waiting for me to erupt because he slammed into me as deep as possible and let out a loud groan before I felt his cock twitching as he met his own release.

We stood there underneath the spray, panting as we tried to catch our breath between kisses.

“I could stay here forever,” Navy murmured against my lips.

“But I’m hungry,” I whined.

“And you made dinner.”

“Yes, I did. I hope you like it.”

“I know I will.”

“We went to the store, but I also got some goodies from your rooftop garden.”

“That’s what it’s there for,” Navy said as he reached behind him and unhooked my feet. He held me with one arm as I put my legs down and then turned me so that the water wasn’t falling directly into my face. “What’s mine is yours, babe, and that includes the produce.”

“What about the dogs?”

“I think they already like you more than me seeing as how I have to drag Spicoli

outside for a walk now that you're here."

"Leave the poor guy alone. He's tired," I said as Navy started massaging shampoo into my hair. I hummed before I said, "If you want dinner, you should let me take over. I can't make it through you doing this without needing a nap when we're finished."

"But I love your hair."

"I'm glad, and I'd love for you to do this later, but right now, I've got food on the stove I need to get back to."

Navy sighed dramatically before he said, "You're such a grown-up."

I batted his hands away so I could finish up before I said, "I've got to get a move on. I need to get in there and feed my man and his minions."

"I don't know that they'd take kindly to hearing you refer to them as minions."

"I trust you to keep my secrets because you know I'll always keep yours."

"What does that mean?" Navy asked.

"It means exactly what I said. Now move over so I can rinse."

N AVY

I used the login information I had saved for Diablo the Douchebag's computer and saw he'd been online less than an hour ago - which meant that either someone else was using his personal computer or he was healthy enough to sit up and type.

That infuriated me so much that I had to close my laptop and walk away from my desk. I stood at the window and looked out over the beach while I tried to regulate my breathing, but there was nothing I could do to stop the thoughts racing through my head.

I heard someone walk into the office and shut the door behind them, and I could tell by their breathing that it wasn't Dali, so I turned around and looked at my friend.

It didn't take but a second for Ajax to motion toward me with his mug and ask, "Who are we killin'?"

"Apparently, they didn't do much to teach that fucker a lesson, because he's been online this morning."

"Well, that's upsetting, isn't it?"

"I was taking a minute to try and get myself together because my first reaction was to sling my laptop like a frisbee, and my second thought was to go shoot that motherfucker in the head."

"The first option is expensive, but the second sounds perfectly reasonable to me."

“So, this fucker can threaten my family and I don’t even know how many others and then go home and have a nice dinner?”

“It appears so.”

“He kidnapped my woman, goddammit!”

“I’m aware of that.”

“At the very least, he should be in fucking traction!”

“I agree.”

“You’re not helping to talk me off the ledge, Ajax!”

“Shit! Am I supposed to be trying?”

“You’re supposed to tell me that it’s never good to go in half-cocked because that’s when mistakes are made and that I should calm the fuck down before I do something stupid and end up back in prison.”

“That sounds perfectly reasonable too.”

“I thought you were leaving.”

“I am, but I thought I’d pop in and pretend you care about it.”

“I’ll miss you every minute until we finally see each other again,” I said, trying my hardest to make my voice sound forlorn.

“Alrighty then!” Dali said from the doorway before she spun around to walk away.

“Dalisay!”

“Y’all have fun, boys. I’m going to get donuts,” Dalisay said as she walked into the living room. Just before I swept her into my arms, I heard her mutter, “And a stiff drink.”

“You know I was joking, right?” I asked her.

“God, I hope so! If you’re going to bring a third party into this relationship, at least make it one who’s good looking and young enough to keep up with me!”

“What.The.Fuck?”

I laughed as Dali grinned at me. She winked before she said, “Out of all your friends, you picked a guy who doesn’t even clean up after himself?”

“You’re fucking kidding!” Ajax yelled over the raucous laughter from the men sitting around my living room. “I told you that in confidence!”

“Told them what?”

“That’s why Sandi’s pissed at me.”

“I don’t blame her. You left my favorite creamer out on the counter, spilled your coffee all over the place, and didn’t even put your spoon in the sink. If you do that every morning, I’m surprised she hasn’t killed you yet.”

The laughter was even louder now because I’d joined in. I set Dalisay down but held onto her as we laughed until Ajax said, “You can all go to hell. I’m going home.”

“Do you want a ride to the airport?”

“I called a car service because I didn’t want to torture you by making you tackle the traffic at the airport, but now I wish I hadn’t just so I could punish you a bit.”

“What kind of punishment?” Dalisay asked.

“What?”

“Like, spanking or . . .” Her voice trailed off when I growled and squeezed her tightly. When I let her go, she walked over to Ajax and gave him a hug before she said, “It was nice to meet you, but it will probably be the only time.”

“What makes you say that?” Ajax asked.

“Because your girlfriend is going to end up killing you. When she does, I promise to keep money on her books in your honor.”

“You deserve him,” Ajax said with a frown before he hugged Dalisay again and whispered something in her ear.

Dalisay just smiled, but then Ajax kissed her temple before he said, “It was a pleasure to meet you and your insane family. Someday I’ll bring Sandi to visit so you can bond over your shared trauma from living with assholes like me and Navy. ”

“He might be an asshole, but he puts my creamer back where it belongs.”

“Ugh!” Ajax yelled in frustration before he walked around to say goodbye to the guys.

Once he was gone, Dalisay shut the door and then walked toward the bedroom as she called out, “I’m going to take my time in the shower so you guys can talk about whatever it is I’m not supposed to hear.”

Chewie gave her enough time to walk through the bedroom into the bathroom before he asked, “What’s got you so riled up?”

“That fucker has already logged onto his dark profile and exchanged three emails with his scumbag friends.”

“Are we sure it’s him?” Shorty asked.

“I didn’t check the IP address, just the accounts.”

“Either way, you need to check the IP so we know where we’re going,” Sully suggested.

“True,” I told him as I walked toward the bedroom. “And when I find out that he’s at home?”

“If he’s recovered enough to be a fucking pervert, I have to assume that he’s well enough for company.”

Chewie shrugged before he said, “I agree with Donner. At this point, the asshole is just begging for it.”

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DALI

“I talked to my father last night, and he agreed that you should come to work for the family since you’re home.”

“Doing what?” I asked my cousin before I went in for another bite of my burger.

While I was chewing, he said, “There are plenty of things for you to do for any of the businesses, Dali. Jodie is working on a new marketing campaign for the stores, so purchasing and inventory is slipping. I know this is horrible to admit because I hate how it came about, but it may be a good thing that Dad won’t be back at the helm for a while.

I feel like I can say that now that we know he’s going to be okay. ”

“That’s rough, Nathan. Damn.”

“It’s not like I wanted him to be attacked, Dali, but you and I both know that an extended hospital stay is the only way to get any of the elders in our family to stay off their feet for any length of time.”

Nathan had a point. Our parents and their siblings were raised with a work ethic that people today don’t seem to understand and they damn sure couldn’t replicate.

Having come from poverty, they helped their parents scratch and save for their first business venture and then worked hard every day alongside them to make it a success.

Over time, the businesses expanded, but they never learned to be idle because they didn’t have it in them to try.

I had the utmost respect for the older generations of my family who had come to America and made a life that we could all be proud of. I didn’t even have to consider it for any length of time to know that if I could lessen their burden in any way, I would do that.

“You want me to take over purchasing and inventory?” I asked. “What in the hell do I know about that?”

“Probably everything,” Nathan said with a grin. “How many times did you take inventory at one of the stores and then report back? How many times did you see an item somewhere else and then fight to get it sold in our stores? How many . . .”

“Okay, okay! I get it. But that doesn’t mean I know anything about the paperwork that’s involved or the computer programs that . . .”

“Jodie has been scrambling to find an inventory system that we can install.”

“There’s still not . . . They haven’t even . . .” I was so stunned that I couldn’t even speak.

“Everything is still handwritten, and there are boxes and boxes of files in the attic of each building. Honestly, I’m surprised that Conrad hasn’t burned the places down yet, because he’s the one that has to go through all that shit to get the taxes done every quarter.”

“That poor man,” I said, horrified at the thought of dealing with such an archaic system - and not just for one business, but for multiple businesses and locations. “Has he started drinking heavily yet?”

“If I was in my brother’s position, I sure as hell would!”

“You’re going to take this time while Uncle is recovering to change everything?” When Nathan nodded, I asked, “Is that wise?”

“He won’t come in and erase it all, especially when he finds out we’ve already invested in whatever programs we decide on.”

“And you’d want my help with that?”

“Yes. It will take some research, but Jodie has already started and has some great ideas. As far as the buying goes, I know you’ll be great at it because you’ve seen the world, Dali.

You’ve met people from all races and backgrounds and that can only help when we’re choosing items to sell in the stores. ”

“What about the car washes?”

“There’s a lot less work on that end, but have you seen what they sell there?”

“I guess I haven’t paid any attention.”

“Those hanging tree air fresheners and umbrellas.”

“They always had those hanging on a rack next to the register.”

“My guess is that the ones hanging there now were here when you left for OCS.”

“Good grief.”

“It makes perfect sense to join the family business, Dali. We’d love to have you. I’m surprised your brothers haven’t already mentioned it.”

“They have.”

“And you blew them off, didn’t you?”

“I thought it was just going to be a pity job or something equally unbearable.”

“There’s no such thing in our family. You know how it’s going to go. You’ll get

hired to do this thing and maybe that thing and end up knowing how to do everything because you won't be able to stop yourself from stepping in where you're needed."

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I laughed before I said, “I was all dressed up to go to a dance one night, but I needed something . . . I can’t even remember what it was now.

Anyway, I stopped in at the store and the place was packed, there was only one girl working the front, and your dad was busy dealing with a busted pipe in the stock room.

I ended up missing the dance and working the register in my dress and heels. ”

“Exactly.”

“I guess that’s how things go with a family business, isn’t it?” Nathan nodded, and I said, “Those businesses kept me fed and clothed while affording me so many more opportunities than our parents ever dreamed of when they were children.”

“Aunt Ligaya’s sons are all doctors, but they still understand how important the stores are to our family. Everything is solvent right now and operating in the black, but they’ve offered to pay for whatever computer systems we need to get.”

“That’s so generous.”

“They feel the same way you do about how the businesses shaped your childhood, but their benefits went well beyond clothes and food - they also paid for their education.”

“I guess it is fitting that they’re willing to take on a few expenses here and there, isn’t it?” I asked with a laugh.

“I’d really like for you to consider this opportunity, Dalisay. You know how important family is to us, and you’re someone we know that we can trust.”

“Why didn’t you have your sister ask me? I know you’re not doing this without her input.”

“If I’d left it up to Jodie, she would have said something like, ‘Show up for work on Monday, bitch, and don’t even try to argue about it!’”

Nathan and I both laughed because he was right. Jodie was not someone you sent in to take care of delicate matters.

“I’ll do it, and I’ll work very hard to make sure I do things right. Don’t let me slip up just because I’m family, Nathan.” I scoffed before I said, “Actually, if I start slipping and not holding my weight, that’s when you send Jodie in for a talk.”

“Exactly!”

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“Honey, I’m home!” I called out as I walked through the door, being careful not to trip over Boogie who had eagerly greeted me at the bottom of the stairs.

I stopped when I realized that it wasn’t Navy sitting at the bar, but his friend, Lurk.

“Dinner’s in the oven,” Lurk said from his seat where he was working on a crossword. “Sully is picking up desert on his way over.”

“Where are Navy and the rest of the guys?”

“They went for a ride to clear their heads and have some time together before we part

ways.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

He turned to look at me, and his expression was so . . . blank that it almost took my breath away.

“I don’t have anything bothering me that I need to clear out, so I took a nice walk on the beach and then came back here for some peace and quiet.”

“In that case, I won’t bother you.”

“Well, this is your home, so I’m really the one bothering you.”

“I don’t mind having you guys around. I think it’s kind of fun.”

“For now, maybe, but I’d imagine it would get tiresome after a bit.”

I had to admit he was right, so I shrugged before I said, “After a while, it could get old having so many big personalities in one place.”

“Lucky for you, it won’t happen often. We usually only congregate in large groups when there’s something big going on that we need to take care of.”

“And now that it’s all been taken care of, you’re going home?”

Lurk’s smile didn’t reach his eyes when he said, “Almost everything is taken care of. I’m sure everyone will leave tomorrow or the next day.”

There was something about this man that kept me on edge. I didn’t feel like I was in danger; it was more that I felt as if I was feet away from a predator who could snap at

any moment.

Lurk went back to his crossword, so I set my purse on the table beside the door before I kicked off my sandals. I walked over to the sink and washed my hands, something my mom had drilled into me and my brothers from birth - always wash the outside from your hands when you come inside.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Taco casserole. I made plenty because I know how much these guys can pack away. There’s also salad fixings in the refrigerator along with fresh pico and guacamole.”

“That sounds wonderful!” I wasn’t sure what to do with myself since Lurk had already completed the tasks I had set out to do for this evening, so I asked, “Would you like to go up to the roof with me for a while? There may be some fresh peppers ready to harvest that I can roast to go with dinner.”

“I’d love to spend time with Navy’s girl.”

“Why do you say it like that?” I asked.

“Because that’s what you are.” Lurk looked confused for a second before he asked, “Aren’t you?”

“Well, yes. He said he plans to never let me go, so I assume he means forever.”

“Navy is not a man who would say something like that unless there was meaning and heart behind it, so I’d assume forever might be almost long enough.”

“Lurk, are you a romantic?”

He frowned before he said, "I'm not sure what it is about the women in your family, but I don't understand any of you."

"What is there to misunderstand?"

"Your aunts did everything but roll out the red carpet for a group of crazy bikers and then they made so much food that I don't know how any of us still fit in our clothes, your cousin giggles and talks about fetishes three minutes after a man tried to kidnap her, and then you sit here and spout heinous accusations about me to my face.

Do none of you have a single ounce of self-preservation? "

"Oh my heavens! Big scary biker man made dinner and is going to check the garden with me. Whatever will I do?" I said breathily in a horrible Southern accent.

"What is wrong with you people?"

"I'm not sure if I should be offended or impressed by that question."

"Either.Neither.What?"

I pointed at Lurk before I said, "You are not nearly as scary as you'd like to think, although I did wonder about you when we first met."

"That's probably the smartest thing you've done this week."

I burst out laughing and said, "You reminded me of a predator pacing behind the bars of his cage, but now I think you might be a lion with a thorn in his paw that just needs some understanding."

"What sort of alternate universe did I just walk into?" Chewie asked as he sauntered

into the kitchen.

“Where did you come from?” I asked.

“I was using Navy’s computer until I felt a disturbance in the force and realized someone was using a sharp stick to poke the rabid animal in the kitchen, so I felt the urge to rush in here and save you.”

“Lurk’s not rabid, he’s just misunderstood. Aren’t you, honey?” I asked as I put my hand in the crook of his arm. “You can tell me all about it while we check the garden.”

“Is this what it feels like to be kidnapped by a crazy person?” Lurk whispered frantically as he stared at Chewie in shock. “I’m not sure what to do.”

“Don’t make any sudden moves and just roll with it until backup arrives,” Chewie whispered back. In a normal tone, he said, “The guys should be back any minute now.”

“Let them know we’re on the roof!”

N AVY

“The security feed is on loop, and the alarm panel has been disabled.”

Preacher’s voice in my ear was comforting, especially since this was one of the more high-tech homes I’d visited. Chewie’s research had helped tremendously. After dinner, I’d memorized the layout of the house and narrowed down the rooms where I thought the office could be.

Apparently, Lurk, Chewie, and Oz were just as bolstered by Preacher’s voice, and we moved seamlessly together across the lawn to get to the back door that Preacher had unlocked remotely.

Just like me, Lurk, Chewie, and Oz were dressed in a disposable hazmat suit that covered us from our boots to our noses with a hood that flipped up over our hair that we had pulled into tight stocking caps.

Our eyebrows were glued down to make sure we didn’t lose a single stray hair at the scene, and we were all wearing goggles so that even our eyelashes couldn’t connect us to the crime.

I was on high alert even though I knew Preacher was watching the cameras and had assured us there wasn’t any security on the grounds.

All I could hear was the sound of my own breathing and the occasional call of a seagull in the distance until Hammer’s voice suddenly came through my earpiece.

It probably wouldn't have been nearly as disturbing if Lurk hadn't jumped in and blended his voice in perfect harmony with Hammer's.

I was so shocked that I slowed down to get my bearings and looked over to find that Chewie was just as surprised.

Oz was the first one to speak when he asked, "What the fuck is happening right now?"

"Damn! He can sing!" Chewie answered as Lurk opened the back door and stepped into the house.

I readjusted the bag on my shoulder and whispered, "We're all gonna be singing the fucking blues in lockup if y'all don't get your shit together and act like you know what you're doing!"

"Is that 'Hooked on a Feeling'?" Chewie asked.

"I will kill both of you!" Preacher yelled in my ear.

Just to be assholes and because it was so much fun to fuck with our friend, we all started quietly chanting, "Ooga-chaka ooga-ooga."

As Lurk danced across the living room, Preacher started mumbling a litany of curses and threats. It took every ounce of willpower I had not to burst out laughing.

"What is going on?" Oz whispered.

"I think someone broke him," Chewie answered.

"I've heard some weird shit about the mountains where his cave is. There's some

spooky shit in the Appalachians.” Oz added. “I don't usually believe in shit like alien invasions, but it's getting easier to imagine.”

“Sounds perfectly reasonable to me,” I said with a shrug. I jumped when there was a muffled scream and then shook my head before I said, “I guess some things never change.”

It didn't take nearly as long to finish up since there were four of us involved, which was something we promised never to do again in the hopes of avoiding prosecution.

However, Diablo and his freakshow friends were the perfect exceptions for the rule.

Apparently, Diablo thought there was safety in numbers and that holding information on shady dealings amongst higher-ups ensured his safety.

But he was wrong.

In the morning, the newscasters would have four more “victims” to add to the list, one of which was the mayor's brother. Another was the council member for our area, yet another was a prosecutor at the district attorney's office, and the coup de grace was the mayor himself.

By the time we made it back to my condo, the world was short four more scumbags, and we had a list of others to research and track down.

Unfortunately, it seemed that there were horrible people in all walks of life.

Tonight, we'd tiptoed into the ritzy side of town and proved that even the rich weren't immune to vengeance.

Or justice.

It all depended on your perspective.

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NAVY

“Wait! You can’t leave yet!” Dali called as she ran down the stairs. “Did I miss anyone?”

“Let me guess, you want to hug us again, cry a little bit, and tell us to be safe.”

Dali looked over at Donner like he’d just sprouted horns and asked, “Did he bump his head while you guys were out last night?”

“No. Why do you ask?” Chewie answered.

“Because we’re going to eat together before everyone leaves.

I’m not a hugger, I damn sure am not going to cry, and I would assume that all of you are experienced riders and know that the world is a dangerous place.

Most drivers have their heads up their asses while they float around in their little metal bubbles playing on their phones.

The only thing you can do is drive defensively because they’re not paying a damn bit of attention to you. ”

“Preach!” Oz cheered as he started a slow clap. Soon, all the men joined in, and Dali blushed at their praise.

After the guys calmed down, Lurk asked, “If you’re not coming down for any of that,

then what are we waiting for?”

“My cousin’s on her way, and she asked me to make sure none of you left before she arrived.”

“As long as she doesn’t take too long,” Donner grumbled as he looked out over the ocean. “I’m starving.”

“Just a few more minutes,” Dali said as she touched his arm and smiled at my friend.

The guys leaving together after being here for more than a week had caused quite an uproar.

Boogie was beside herself with the amount of attention she was getting today.

She started with Chewie and worked her way down the line of men out front before she went right back to Chewie to start the process again.

Even Spicoli had come downstairs to watch the exodus - but he wasn’t interested in any farewell scratches.

As usual, he’d found a shady spot right in the middle of the walkway and camped out there to snooze through everyone’s goodbyes.

We were standing near Spicoli when a bright red Jeep turned in at the mouth of the alley. When it got closer, I realized that there was a young woman driving with Jodie in the passenger seat. But the most surprising part of their visit was in the back seat.

When the young woman stopped, several of us hurried over to help Dali’s aunts out of the back.

They were barking orders at Dali, Jodie, and Jodie's daughter in Tagalog, which none of us understood.

Judging from the activity, I gathered that they were giving instructions on what to get out of the storage compartment.

"They brought us road snacks?" Lurk asked in a shocked whisper.

I hadn't spent enough time with Dali's extended family to know which aunt was which, so I watched as the women addressed each other and figured out that the older woman in the yellow shirt was Aunt Ligaya which meant the one in the purple had to be Aunt Amihan.

I was surprised when Lurk bent forward and took Aunt Ligaya's hand before holding it to his forehead as he said, "Mano po."

Aunt Ligaya smiled proudly before she said in English, "God bless you. Safe travels, my new friend."

Chewie, not to be outdone, followed Lurk's lead and did the same thing with Aunt Amihan's hand. She said words in Tagalog that Dali translated to, "You're always welcome to come back, but be safe until you do."

"Thank you," Chewie said as he took the large Ziploc bag of food that Aunt Amihan handed him.

Once Donner had greeted Aunt Ligaya and she handed him a bag, he looked at the contents and asked, "Is that homemade jerky?"

Aunt Ligaya was so tiny that she still had to go up on her tiptoes to whisper in Donner's ear even though he had bent forward. I was close enough to hear her say,

“There’s extra because I want you to come back.”

“I’d come back even if you didn’t feed me so well,” Donner assured her. He looked surprised when Ligaya threw her arms around his neck and gave him a long hug.

I could see the emotion on his face when she leaned back with tears in her eyes and said, “I hope you find the peace you’re looking for, sweet child.”

The rest of the men spoke respectfully to the elder women of Dalisay’s family and then hugged them before they said goodbye.

Once they helped the aunts back into the Jeep, we stood with Dalisay and Jodie and watched it drive away, making sure to wave when they turned to look back at the end of the alley.

“I love your family,” Sully told Dali and Jodie.

“And they love all of you,” Dali assured them. “You’re our family now, too, and that means you have to keep in touch. You know that, right?”

“Of course,” Sully assured her.

“I’ll definitely be in touch because I’m going to be checking in on Jaimee to make sure she gets settled in at college,” Chewie announced.

“It makes me feel so much better knowing there will be a friendly face nearby,” Jodie said cheerfully. “I still hate that she’s leaving, but I’m relieved to know you’ll watch over her.”

“I’m close by, too, so I’ll stop in and say hello now and then,” Oz told her.

Donner nodded and said, "I'm not nearly as close as they are, but I'm only a call away if she needs help."

"I'm going to come back next month with some things for your aunts," Bandit announced. He grinned at me and Dali before he said, "If you're lucky, I may even say hello to you while I'm here."

"I got their address so I can send them some things from home," Maple announced.

I checked the time on my watch before I said, "We should probably go. Rafael's got a whole spread for all of you, and I'd hate to keep him waiting."

"I won't have to ride my bike home. Somebody can just push me a few feet, and I'll roll there on my own," Goose complained with a grin. "I haven't ever eaten so much good food before."

"It's our love language," Jodie said as she nudged him with her elbow. "Maybe someday you'll find a woman who speaks it, too, so you won't starve to death eating ramen and sandwiches."

Goose scoffed before he nudged her back and said, "I haven't starved yet, and the last thing I need is a woman around all the time, especially if she's as crazy as you."

"The crazy ones are the most fun," Trout announced. "They keep a man on his toes."

"Most of us only develop the trait after dealing with men for years," Dali announced as she walked toward my bike. "Come on, gentlemen. There's a feast waiting for us."

"Will someone give me a ride over?" Jodie asked.

I ushered Boogie and Spicoli back into the gate and then secured it before I followed

Dali over to my bike.

I sat and flipped up the kickstand before I held my hand out to hold her steady while she threw her leg over the bike to get settled.

Once everyone was saddled up and ready, I led our group down the alley.

Since it was so early in the day, traffic was even more of a pain in the ass than usual, so it took us a little longer to get to Three Sheets. As we filed into the bar, I smelled bacon, and my stomach rumbled loudly.

Dad greeted my club brothers as if they were his own sons.

I guess they were in a way. He'd welcomed them into our small family just as easily as he and my mom had welcomed Dalisay when she and Corrie were young.

I knew that my brothers loved and respected my father, and if anything ever happened to me, they'd step up and help him get through it just like I would with their loved ones.

It was reassuring to know that even though we were spread out around the country, we could have trusted friends here to help us with just a single call, no matter how big or small the problem happened to be.

Dad and Rafael had already put the plywood over the pool table so we could use it as a buffet, and I saw that there were warmers set up to keep everything hot.

It didn't take much encouragement to get a line started, and within just a few minutes, my friends were seated at tables around the bar, eating breakfast while they discussed their upcoming trips home and made plans to see each other again.

“In case I haven’t mentioned it, I just want you to know that I love your friends,” Dalisay said as she sat next to me. Jodie laughed loudly from a table across the way where she was sitting with some of the guys, and Dali smiled before she said, “And so does the rest of my family.”

“What’s not to love? We’re fantastic,” Oz teased from his seat across the table.

“And very full of yourself,” Dali retorted with a grin. “You’re not all that, Oz. Clark is . . . Navy is . . . but you, not so much.”

“Burn,” Dad whispered before he put his hand out to bump knuckles with my girl. Dalisay looked shocked as she reached out to grab his hand. She ran her thumb over his wedding ring and said, “You got it back!”

“Anthony brought it to me.”

When Dalisay looked at me, there was an odd light in her eyes but her smile was genuine when she said, “I’m proud of him for doing that. I know how much it means to you and was sad to see how upset it made you to go without it.”

“I’ve had that ring on my finger since the day my sweetheart promised me forever, and I’ll wear it until I join her on the next step of our journey.”

Tears filled Dali’s eyes as she whispered, “I’ve always dreamed of a love like that.”

Dad lifted her hand to his lips and whispered back, “Looks like you may have found it.”

Breakfast went on a little longer than I thought it would, probably because the men knew that this may be the last time they saw this group of friends together for some time, if ever again. But they had homes to go back to and schedules to keep, so before

long, it was time to see everyone off.

Dad made sure to thank each man personally before he assured them that they'd always have a cold beer waiting for them at Three Sheets and a comfortable bed to sleep in whenever they had a chance to come back.

Finally, we were all outside, and the guys were saying their own goodbyes to each other.

I joined them in the parking lot to thank them again and make sure they knew they were always welcome.

They all knew that already, just like I knew that I'd have a place wherever they lived, but it was nice to be able to say the words out loud and in person to each of them.

As we watched the last of them pull out onto the road, Dali reached up and wiped tears away before she said, "I'm gonna miss them."

"They'll be back now and then, and we can always go see them."

"Even Maple?" Dali asked with a grin.

"I'm not a big fan of snow or cold weather, but I'd go to Maine if he needed my help or if you asked nicely."

"I'll keep that in mind."

D ALI

The last few weeks had been so hectic, between saying goodbye to the guys and getting settled into my new position at my family's business, that I hadn't had much time to myself.

A strong work ethic had been drilled into me from a very young age.

I'd watched my parents work from sunup until sundown while raising me and my brothers.

Of course, with that much time spent working, I'd grown up knowing how to do every job imaginable, from sweeping floors and stocking groceries, to checking out customers and building a rapport with people in the community.

This job would entail all of that with the added bonus of being able to bring all of the businesses into the modern age with wonderful things like inventory software and accounting programs. When I made my first call to my cousin Conrad, who had a degree in business accounting and a team of people who helped him do payroll and taxes, and talked to him about the different accounting programs I thought could be helpful, I thought I could hear tears of relief in his voice.

While Navy worked to catch up on his own work-related ventures, I immersed myself in learning everything I could about inventory and buying programs and had meetings with my cousins about marketing and ways to keep the businesses within the family company relevant in modern times.

By the time Uncle Bayani was back on his feet and ready to get back to work, the store had changed drastically.

At first, he was irritated, but I had to give him credit for keeping an open mind while we explained the changes and then embracing them once he realized that we had everything under control and his hard work through the years had paid off.

We even convinced Uncle Bayani, Aunt Amiham, and Aunt Ligaya to drive up the coast with me and Navy to visit my parents for the weekend.

Usually, at least one of the siblings would stay in Oceanside to watch over the businesses, but now that they trusted that everything was in good hands with their children, they felt more comfortable letting go of the reins for a day or two.

What surprised me most was that they decided to extend their visit for a while so that Navy and I could drive back to Oceanside alone.

I had just closed my laptop when I heard voices on the stairs and smiled when I realized that my friend Corrie was finally home from her extended vacation.

She was smiling when she walked out onto the rooftop terrace.

I hurried over and met her halfway with a big hug and tears of happiness at the thought of being so close to her again.

When she finally pulled out of my embrace, she pinched my arm and asked, “Did you have something to do with Navy keeping us out of town for so long?”

“How did Navy keep you out of town? He said James was taking you on a surprise honeymoon cruise.”

“Surprise is right! A few days ago, James confessed that he’d been keeping me away at Navy’s request but said that it was safe for us to come back home now.”

“It’s been a crazy few days.”

“Few days? Girl, it's been almost a month since we left.”

“That can’t be.”

“I assure you it has. I’ve developed permanent sea legs and am so happy to be home that I walked around my condo professing my love to all of my furniture before I sat in the middle of my bed and swore I’d never leave again.”

“Has it really been that long?” I asked, more to myself than Corrie. When I realized she was right, I gasped and said, “Holy shit! It has!”

“What have you been doing since I’ve been gone? I peeked into the guest room and saw you’ve already found a place of your own. I was going to call you after I came up to check the garden.”

My eyes got wide when I remembered that Corrie had no idea what had happened in the time she was away.

“What’s that look for?”

“I didn’t find my own place.”

“Then where’s all your stuff?” Corrie asked.

I bit my lip before I admitted, “I moved in with Navy just a few days after you left.”

“You what ?” Corrie screamed. She started jumping up and down in excitement as she squealed in happiness. By the time I got her to calm down, James had come up to the roof to see what was going on.

When she composed herself enough to explain what I’d said to James, he shook his head and turned around to go back downstairs before he called out, “Take your time catching up, ladies. I’ll order dinner and bring it up when it gets here.”

Corrie and I got comfortable in the shade of the umbrella, and then I spilled the details of everything that had happened since the day she left.

“If I’d have known how sad you were about coming home, I’d have never left you here alone.”

“I was just drifting, Corrie. There really wasn’t anything you could have done other than commiserate and get a hangover right along with me.”

“You and Anthony are a couple,” she said for at least the tenth time since I’d told her.

“Yes, we are. He said he wants me to stay with him, which is great, because I can’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be.”

“It’s so romantic.”

“I knew you’d be happy for me. Even though it’s been a long time, you have to remember how I felt about him when we were younger.”

“When we were younger? You mean last year? And the year before that?”

“Something like that,” I admitted.

“And now the two of you are in love.”

“We haven’t said those exact words, but it’s early yet and . . .”

“I can tell by the look on your face that you love him.”

“I do,” I admitted. “The crush I had on Anthony was completely different from the love I feel for Navy.”

“I understand.”

“You do?”

“He’s not crazy or anything, but he is two different men. There’s the computer dork who stays up way too late at night playing on his laptop, and then there’s the hard ex-con who rides his motorcycle and doesn’t give a shit what the world thinks about him.”

“Exactly,” I agreed.

“But he cares what you think about him.”

“I’d hope so since he said he was never going to let me leave,” I joked.

“I think Anthony has been so invested in making sure that the world is a safer place for kids like I was back then that he never let himself imagine having the life he deserves.”

“Do you know about . . . Has he told you . . .” I looked away, hoping I hadn’t already said too much. Surely, Corrie didn’t have the same questions about what Navy did on those nights when he went off by himself, and if she didn’t, then I certainly wasn’t

going to put them in her head.

“What do you mean?” Corrie asked.

“It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit,” she said as she studied my face. “We may not have been attached at the hip for the last ten years, Dali, but I know you better than I know myself. I can tell there’s something rattling around in that big brain of yours.”

“Jodie and I were almost kidnapped,” I reminded her to change the subject.

“That sucks. Obviously, you made it out of the situation in good shape. Stop trying to change the subject. What do you know?”

“I don’t know anything.”

“What do you think ?”

“About?”

“Do you ever watch the news, Dali?”

“More now than ever,” I admitted.

“Have you noticed that some things happen at the same time other things closer to home happen?”

I knew from her vague question that Corrie had the same suspicions I did, so I asked, “Do you think Navy is the one exacting vengeance on online predators?”

“I’ve never asked him, but if he was, how would that make you feel?”

“Proud,” I answered without even having to consider my answer. And then I admitted to my friend what I was almost too afraid to admit to myself, “Terrified.”

“Of Anthony?”

“Of him getting caught.”

“I scour the local and national news every day, and one thing I’ve noticed is that men like that are attacked all over the place, not just nearby.”

“Right.”

“Which makes me believe that the people who are doing those things have a plan in case one of them finds themselves under scrutiny.”

“A good criminal would think of all the possible outcomes before he commits a crime.”

“You met quite a few of Navy’s friends, didn’t you?”

“I did. Almost a dozen so far.”

“And what did you think about them?”

“That they’re good men with illustrious pasts.”

“That is a very sweet way to describe devious and homicidal people.”

“I can see it in some, but not others.”

“Don’t look too hard, or you might start to agree with me.”

“A person can be two things at once.”

“Yes, they can. Just like I’m a bestie who is dying to know all the details of everything that’s happened, but I’m also a mom who needs to get downstairs and make sure the laundry gets started before I go to the store for groceries.”

“Luckily, I can help with the last two things while I answer your questions about the first.”

“I’m so glad you’re home, Dali.”

“So am I. I missed this place every day that I was gone.”

“Yeah, I’m glad you’re here, but I meant I’m glad you’ve found your home with my brother, just like I’m ecstatic that he’s found his home with you.”

“You’re gonna make me cry,” I whispered as my eyes welled.

“You need to admit that you love him so that he can admit that he loves you right back. Once that’s done, you can start planning your wedding so that we can finally be sisters like we always dreamed.”

“You’re my sister whether I’m married to your brother or not.”

“Damn right I am.”

???

Once I was finished cleaning up, I walked back into the bedroom naked and slipped

under the covers to join Navy who was propped up against the headboard with a sated smile.

“I love you.”

Navy didn’t even open his eyes when he said, “I love you too.”

“I’m going to marry you, Clark Anthony Michaels.”

He finally opened his eyes before he argued, “I have to ask you first.”

“No, you don’t. This is me asking you,” I said as I sat up beside him. I turned so that I was sitting on my heels facing him before I reached out and laid my hand over his heart. “Navy, would you do me the honor of becoming my husband and making me happy and crazy for the rest of our lives?”

“Where’s the ring?” When I narrowed my eyes, he smiled and then turned to open the drawer on the nightstand. His body was blocking my view, so I was surprised when he rolled to his back again holding a diamond ring up for inspection. “Will this work?”

“When did you buy that?”

“I didn’t. I asked my dad to give it to me the day I returned his wedding band.”

“You did?” When Navy nodded, I said, “That was weeks ago!”

“The first night I held you in my arms, I knew I never wanted to let you go. I was just waiting for you to catch up.”

As he slipped it on my finger, I said, “I want to get married right away. No big

production, just something simple.”

“What’s the hurry, babe?” Navy asked. His eyes widened as he eagerly whispered, “Are you pregnant?”

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even breathe. I could only stare at him in shock at the hopeful tone of his voice when he asked me that question. Finally, I managed to choke out, “Do you want to have kids?”

It was like shutters came down, blocking the emotions in his eyes before he said, “I want what you want.”

“Don’t do that, Navy. We promised to be honest with one another, right? Talk to me.”

“I’m not sure I’d be a good father, but I want more than anything to try.”

“I think you’d make a great father.”

“What do you want?” Navy asked.

“A little girl with your hair and eyes, and a boy with your smile and attitude.”

“One of each, huh?”

“Neither of us are getting any younger, honey, so if we can figure out a way to make sure we get two at once or very close together, that would be ideal.”

“Wow. That’s a lot to take in,” Navy admitted as he pulled me into his arms. After a long, passionate kiss, he whispered, “I’d be honored to call myself your husband, and I can’t wait to raise a family with you, Dalisay.”

“We should get married this weekend.”

“I’d kind of like to take some time to plan something a little bigger.”

“Can we do it soon?”

“Why are you in such a hurry, babe?”

“Because a wife can’t be compelled to testify to anything that happened before or during her marriage.”

His brow furrowed before he asked, “What makes you think it might come to that?”

I gave him another kiss before I announced, “I wouldn’t testify against you anyway, Navy, but I’d lie my fucking ass off to give you an alibi if you ever needed one.

I haven’t spent a single moment in this bed alone since we met, and I’m never going to.

You’ve never left me here alone. Not even once. ”

“What are you saying, Dali?”

“That I love you. I love all the different parts of you that make up the man I respect and adore with all of my heart. I can’t wait to raise children with you because I know you’ll do everything in your power to protect them as well as every other kid that you can.”

“How long have you known?” Navy asked.

“I didn’t until just now, but it doesn’t matter. I love you and that’s what’s important.”

“I love you too.”

SIXTEEN MONTHS LATER

NAVY

“Wake up, sleepyhead!”

I opened my eyes and frowned at Dalisay before I asked, “What’s wrong with you?”

“I want to be out on the water when the sun comes up.”

I sat up in bed and ran my hands over my face before I put my feet on the floor and looked up at my wife. “What’s wrong?”

“Do I need to speak slower or rephrase my request?”

I ignored her tone and as I walked toward the bathroom to brush my teeth I asked, “What’s the temperature?”

“It’s 55 degrees. You’re gonna need a wetsuit.”

I leaned back to look at Dali through the doorway and asked around the toothbrush in my mouth, “Did I do something wrong?”

“I don’t know. Did you?” When I frowned at her, she frowned back before she stomped one of her feet and yelled, “Can you please just . . .” Dali closed her eyes and took a deep breath before, in a calmer voice, she asked, “Can you please put on a wetsuit and go out on the water with me?”

The last few months had been hard on my wife, and as much as I had tried to be understanding, sometimes just hearing my voice pissed her off. She was going through a lot right now. I understood that because I was feeling it too.

In the hopes of having a child (or two, if we were lucky), we had stopped using any form of birth control the day we got married.

After a few months of no success, Dali turned to her aunts for guidance and tried all the natural remedies they suggested to try and boost her fertility.

I hated the thought of not knowing if it might be my body at fault, so I scheduled an appointment with my doctor so I could get my sperm count checked.

When it came back better than average, that caused Dali to spiral even further into trying everything she could to get pregnant.

We had sex in every conceivable position, which I didn't mind at all, until a few months ago when it started to feel like an assignment rather than passion.

I didn't voice that out loud because I liked my head attached firmly to my neck, but she started to feel it, too, and backed off a little bit.

She eventually started to accept that we may need professional help with conception, and Dali scheduled an appointment with a fertility doctor.

His initial tests came back with mixed results.

He explained that Dali was healthy and able to conceive a child, but with her age, it was just going to get more and more difficult.

He started her on shots and pills that would help boost her hormones and system and gave us a timeline of how we should progress if those didn't help.

The shots made her difficult to live with - so difficult that I found myself avoiding her when I should have been beside her through it all.

It took an intervention from Corrie and Jodie to make her see that her behavior was borderline obsessive.

The girls swept her away for the weekend to help her relax and take her mind off things, and when she came back, it seemed like she had finally decided to let nature take its course.

Dali put on a brave face and announced that if it was meant to be, it would happen and then cried at night when she thought I was sleeping. The crying gradually slacked off until she was pretty much her old self.

But then the gloom seemed to take over, and a few months ago, my Dali turned into a woman I didn't recognize. Worse than that, she turned into a woman that she didn't recognize.

Our early morning surfing sessions had turned into early morning arguments and our late night snuggles became late night bickering.

Suddenly, she had taken issue with my breathing, saying it was too loud, and then she wondered if I'd always blinked this often.

There was a laundry list of other complaints, but those were the two hardest to overcome.

When I asked for advice from my father and brother-in-law, they both laughed at me and said I should be glad she hadn't tried to poison my coffee yet.

And now, we were headed out on a cool morning into even colder water, and it seemed like she was doing her best to control her abject hatred of everything I said or

did, which felt promising.

No matter how much I wanted to please her, I couldn't stop breathing or blinking, but I had figured out how to chew more quietly than before and made sure I never wiggled my toes while we were laying in bed beside each other.

Honestly, that was almost as difficult as forcing myself to blink less often.

Once I had my wetsuit on, I followed Dali down the stairs to the storage room where we kept our boards, and within minutes, we were out on the water - the one place we could go where I didn't seem to piss her off every other second.

By the time we got far enough out to enjoy the calmness around us, I had decided to approach my wife with an idea I'd come up with a few months ago.

As soon as we were both sitting up on our boards, I reached out and took her hand before I said, "Dali, I love you more than life itself and always will, but I think we need to get a divorce."

"What?" Dali screamed.

"Hear me out, babe. It's not in the cards for us to have a baby, but that doesn't mean you can't have one on your own.

There are so many children out there who need a loving home that it only makes sense for one or two of them to be raised by a wonderful woman like you.

But you can't do that married to me. With my record, there's not a chance in hell that any adoption agency would give you the time of day, but if we get a divorce and live separately for a while, you can get the process started.

Once you're in the clear and the kids are yours forever, we'll invite all the boys and

their women to town and have the blowout wedding we didn't have the first time. ”

“You'd let me go so I could become a mom?” Dali asked. When I nodded, she burst into tears and wailed, “That's so fucking sweet, Navy!”

“I can have the papers drawn up this afternoon, and if we . . .”

“I'm pregnant!” Suddenly, all of Dali's dreams came true. Not only was she going to have a baby, but I'd completely forgotten how to breathe and blink altogether. There was a dark haze at the edge of my vision when Dali poked me in the chest and asked, “Aren't you going to say something?”

I finally sucked in a breath and then coughed a few times before I asked, “How far along are you?”

“I don't know. I know I said I wasn't going to get my hopes up anymore, but remember when you started getting onto me about eating better and taking care of myself?”

“Yeah.”

“I stopped eating because I was feeling sick. I thought maybe I was giving myself an ulcer or something, so I scheduled an appointment with my GP. She did a pregnancy test as part of my workup, and it came back positive.”

“Holy shit.”

“That doesn't mean we're out of the woods, but I wanted to tell you so badly that I just couldn't wait”

“And I was gone last night,” I said sadly.

“You were doing bad things to bad people, and I’ll never fault you for that. However, after the baby gets here, I’m gonna need you to schedule those around his sleep patterns, okay?”

“His, huh?”

“His. Hers. Either is fine with me. All I know is that there’s a baby in our future that’s a little bit of me and a little bit of you and I already love it.”

“And I love you,” I said as I leaned over to kiss her, careful not to tip either of us as I did.

“You’d give me up to make me happy?” Dali asked.

“I never said I’d give you up, baby. I said that we’d divorce and live separately. But, as you know, I’ve gotten really good at sneaking in and out of places, and I’ll be damned if I ever spend a night away from my wife unless I absolutely have to.”

“Who’d have thought that the boy I had a crush on would turn into the love of my life?”

“You did, Dali, and when you want something, you never give up until you get it.”

“I’m stubborn like that, but you’re the perfect man for me, so it all worked out in the end.”

“Does this mean I can start blinking normally and wiggling my toes?”

Dali smiled before she kissed me again. When she finally pulled away, she whispered, “Don’t push it.”

THE END