

## Prologue

*She came awake slowly, eyes blinking against the overhead light. She shifted a little and became suddenly aware that she was in a real bed, not in the seat of her HMMWV or on the hard nylon of an Army-issue cot. The almost-forgotten comfort only served to confuse her further.*

*"Oh good, you're awake," a woman's voice off to her right observed.*

*She slowly turned her head, wincing when a sore spot touched the pillow. Her eyes came to rest on a blurry figure in a battle dress uniform; silver bars gleamed in the light. She watched the nurse come closer, stethoscope looped around her neck. She tried to speak, but found her mouth and throat too dry to produce anything more than a slight groan. Suddenly a straw was offered to her lips.*

*"Go slowly. Don't shock your system all at once," the nurse ordered gently.*

*She nodded carefully and did as ordered. Slow, wonderfully wet sips cleared away the cotton-dry feeling in her mouth and throat. When she finished, the straw was pulled away, then she relaxed into her pillow.*

*"You might want these," the nurse offered, and carefully slipped a pair of prescription glasses in place.*

*Instantly the world came into sharper focus. The hospital room was like every other she'd ever been in, but this time the nurse, she thought, was infinitely better looking than most. Auburn hair framed a face delicate enough to belong to a porcelain doll and complemented eyes whose color reminded her of the green apples she used to pick at her aunt's farm.*

*"Thank you," she managed. "Ma'am."*

*The nurse chuckled. "Good thing you remembered that; I'd hate to have to have you drawn and quartered," she said as she moved the blanket and slipped the stethoscope under the hospital-issue gown. "Shh."*

*The patient in the bed endured the usual elements of examination, breaking into a sweat and feeling the edge of pain move to a slightly higher level when she leaned up to allow the nurse to listen to her lungs from the back. Warm hands helped guide her back to the bed when it was over. She lay there exhausted, the scratch of pen on paper indicating that the results were being recorded. "Now we get to play a game," the nurse deadpanned as she flipped a page on the chart. She carefully watched the curious, pale blue eyes that stared back. "Do you remember your name?"*

*"Staff Sergeant Callan G. O'Malley, ma'am," the patient answered with half a smile, suddenly aware of the tightness in her face.*

*"You've answered question two, so we'll move on to three: what day is it?"*

*Callan thought, trying to gauge how much time had passed since the lights had gone out. Unsuccessful, she refocused on the nurse. "The day I woke up from getting my ass handed to me, ma'am?" She watched her nurse try to suppress a smile.*

*"I'll give you that one."*

*"Excuse me, ma'am. What's your name?" Callan asked in a soft voice.*

*"Lieutenant Rivers. What's the G stand for?"*

*Callan frowned. "Grace."*

*Rivers chuckled. "I take it you don't like it."*

*"Do I look like a Grace, ma'am?" Callan asked as she tried to shift in bed.*

*"Not at the moment, no." She read down the checklist. "President of the United States?"*

*"Bush."*

*"Godzilla or Mothra?" Lieutenant Rivers hid her smile.*

*Callan blinked twice. "Would that be based on a rating of fighting skill or looks?" she countered.*

*This time Lieutenant Rivers let herself laugh. "Sergeant O'Malley, I think you are suffering no ill effects from that knock on the head." She leaned forward, clutching the file to her chest. "Kevlars are meant to keep your head intact. Next time, wear your brain bucket. That's an order."*

*Callan heard the rate of the heart monitor beeps jump as her anxiety level went off the chart. In her mind, she could hear the mine exploding under her vehicle and the shouts of near panic mixing with the distinct popping sound of gunfire.*

*Lieutenant Rivers moved quickly to Callan's side. "Sergeant O'Malley?"*

*"My guys." Her eyes searched Rivers's face in desperation. "Did they make it? Barnes was hit pretty bad."*

*"They made it," the nurse assured her. "Barnes and the rest are here and breathing." Her voice took on a practiced soothing quality. "You need to calm down. We don't want you messing up the surgeon's work."*

*"Surgeon?"*

*"That would be Major Thompkins. He's sort of like all the king's horses and all the king's men, only better." She smiled.*

*Callan winced against the pain. "Call me Dumpty," she managed, then took a slow, steadying breath. "Jesus, how bad did I get hit?"*

*"Major Thompkins will explain it to you in a short while."*

*"Please, ma'am, I'd really like to know," Callan impertuned. "I won't tell on you, I promise." She attempted a ghost of a smile.*

*"Okay." Rivers sighed and looked to the door, making sure the coast was clear. "In English, you have shrapnel wounds to your arms, legs, and face. There is a back-to-front gunshot wound just under your right shoulder blade that resulted in broken ribs and a collapsed lung. The new haircut is courtesy of an eight-stitch, concussion-causing wound." She watched carefully as her patient processed the information. "You were transported off the field via evac to the medical facility in Turkey. Once you were stable, they flew you here to Ramstein. Sergeant O'Malley, you are a mess, but the important thing is that you have made it, and you will recover."*

*Callan blinked a few times in response before her eyes locked onto Lieutenant Rivers's. "I am never going to do Packard any more favors," she decided out loud, and closed her eyes.*

*"How's the pain?"*

*"Not too bad, ma'am," Callan lied.*

*"Sergeant O'Malley, you are exactly like every other MP I have ever treated. I can still order you drawn and quartered, you know."*

*Callan's eyes shot open. "Ma'am?"*

*"You will leave the macho bullshit at the door when I am around. You can admit it hurts, Sergeant; I won't tell your buddies. I cannot treat your pain if I don't know how bad it is. Am I coming in clearly?"*

*Callan sighed. "Crystal clear, ma'am."*

*The irritated tone was replaced by one of concern. "On a scale of one to ten."*

*"Right now, five and a quarter, ma'am."*

*Lieutenant Rivers arched an eyebrow. "Tell me, Sergeant, do you always buck authority?" she asked as she replaced the chart in its holder.*

*Callan smiled a bit. "Only when I think I can get away with it, ma'am."*

*"I'll make note of that. You get some rest. I'll check with the doctor about getting you some more pain meds on board." She turned to leave.*

*"Ma'am."*

*Rivers turned back. "Yes?"*

*"Godzilla, but only on fighting skill."*

*"Sergeant, you are going to be trouble. I can tell."*

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Callan G. O'Malley woke from her dream quickly, but without starting. She automatically reached for her pack of smokes. Tucking a cigarette between her lips, she swung her legs off the bed and then slowly slipped the matchbook free from the cellophane wrapper. She took her time lighting up, wondering at the same time when the dreams would stop. She closed her eyes and inhaled the smoke. When she opened them again, she let out a stream of smoke and stood.

The morning sounds of the prisoners at the county correctional facility reached her ears as she listened to the normal, everyday chaos beginning. When she could no longer put off the inevitable, she crushed out her cigarette. Slowly, she shed her prison uniform and dressed in musty-smelling jeans and a gray T-shirt.

*At least my socks are clean,* she thought, as she pulled the thick white cotton onto her feet. Her black boots were next. When she heard the call for breakfast and the cell doors unlocked electronically, she looked up. A few minutes later, prisoners on her tier started passing by her locked door. Some wished her luck, others said nothing, and there were, inevitably, some threats tossed her way, vivid descriptions of what they would do to her when they got out. She ignored them. Finally they were all gone, and the only sounds she could hear were the footfalls of the guard coming to escort her.

"Open two twelve," a female voice boomed, echoing down the tier. The lock disengaged and the door slid open. "Two twelve, step out."

O'Malley stepped out of the cell and onto the metal floor of the tier. She stood still, not moving a muscle. She waited while the uniformed guard inspected her cell to make sure it was free of any personal items and held nothing that could be used as a weapon by the next occupant.

Finally, the guard joined O'Malley on the tier. "Turn to your right and walk forward. You will proceed down the steps and follow the blue line. Do not stray from the blue line. Do you understand these instructions, O'Malley?" The guard sounded almost bored.

O'Malley resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Yes, ma'am."

"Let's go. I don't have all day."

O'Malley nodded and turned to her right. She walked forward, and then down the metal steps. Together, guard and prisoner followed the blue line on the floor until they reached the release office. O'Malley wondered for a moment why they called it an office, since it was a counter with a warehouse space attached.

She produced her prison ID and signed several slips of official-looking paper. Once those were passed back, she waited for her personal items to be handed over to her. Another bored guard pushed over a manila envelope. O'Malley ripped it open and let the contents fall onto the counter. She picked up her wallet and slipped it into her back pocket.

"You're not going to count your cash?" the officer asked, sounding every bit as confused as he looked.

Pale blue eyes locked onto him. "Why, did you steal anything?" she asked as she fitted a stainless steel bracelet onto her right wrist.

"Of course not."

"Then I don't have to count it. If you can't trust the cops..." She let the sentence die as she wound her watch, then abandoned the effort when she discerned that the battery was dead. Absently she signed the statement confirming that everything was in order.

"Follow the blue line," she was ordered.

She turned and trailed the blue line to freedom. When she finally reached the metal door leading to the outside, she turned her ID over to the guard and signed out for the last time, then stepped out into the sunlight.

The door closed behind her and O'Malley took a long breath. She looked around and quickly located a Mexican woman standing across the street, her back pressed against a wall. O'Malley waved and darted across the street.

As O'Malley's feet touched the curb, Maria pushed away from the wall and launched into a tight hug. "That's jaywalking, O'Malley," she teased.

"So arrest me," O'Malley growled. She pulled out of the embrace. "You look good."

"You lost weight," Maria observed.

"Let's get out of here."

"Bike's around the corner. How 'bout I buy you breakfast?" Maria offered.

"Steak and eggs?" O'Malley hoped aloud.

"For you? Of course." Maria smiled as she led the way down the sidewalk.

## Chapter 1

Maria kept an eye on the petite woman as she worked her way to the bar. She noted the look of fatigue on the still-young face even as she reached into the beer cooler. It took only a second for her to pull the cap off the beer, set it on the counter in front of the only empty seat, and toss the mangled cap over her shoulder. The young woman promptly filled the seat.

Maria pushed the ice-cold brew closer to the woman. "Here you go, Terri."

Terri picked up the beer and took a long sip. "God, thank you, Maria," Terri said gratefully as she set the bottle down. "All right. Where is the rat bastard?" she asked, almost too tired to be angry. Her feet hurt, and besides...her feet hurt.

Maria stifled a chuckle. The woman in front of her might look like a piece of fluff, but when she needed to be, she was all spitfire. "He's in the back, playing poker," she answered.

Terri took another sip of her beer. "How long?"

Maria turned and looked at the clock. "About five hours now."

Terri's milk-chocolate eyes hardened. "He been losing?"

"I'd have to say yes," Maria answered, and something close to panic flitted across Terri's face. She placed her hand gently on Terri's forearm. "*Chica*, you have to get away from him."

Terri turned away. "Easy to say, Maria, but getting away from him is hard to do. I tried that once, and he came looking for me and brought me back."

"A lot of the guys like you, maybe they could help."

Terri shook her head. "And what are they going to want in return? With Trey, at least I know what the score is. Besides, most of the guys think Trey's up Spyder's ass. Who's going to mess with Spyder or his yes-man?"

Maria didn't have to answer. None of the club members would take on the leader or his appointed second. Spyder was one mean son of a bitch and had proven it on many occasions. It was a no-win situation. She watched quietly as Terri finished her beer.

"Who's he playing with?"

Maria sighed. "John, Mike, Gato, and O'Malley. You want another beer?"

“I better not. John, Mike, and Gato will let me pay over time, but I’ve never heard of this O’Malley. I hope whatever I have on me is enough to cover Trey’s losses,” Terri answered, all the while thinking that a second beer sounded like a small piece of heaven.

“Terri, I’ll cover your beer. It’s not like you’ve ever stiffed me on a tip or never bought me a round.”

“I can’t. I appreciate the gesture—”

Maria interrupted and finished the sentence for her. “But Trey would think you’re holding out on him.” For a long moment Terri was frozen, then she nodded slowly. “Okay, how ’bout a friend of mine buys you the beer? Can he argue with that?”

Terri’s smile was tired as she teased, “Aren’t you a little old for imaginary friends, Maria?” Half a second later, she started when a group of empty beer bottles was loudly clattered onto the countertop.

A voice to Terri’s left sounded light and playful. “Maria, are you pretending you don’t know me again?”

Maria grinned with joy. “What’s your name again?”

The presence choked back a laugh. “Well, apparently last night it was ‘oh God.’ We need another round.”

“I think we can do that. O’Malley, this is Terri; Terri, this is Callan O’Malley.” She provided the introduction as she turned to raid the beer cooler again.

Terri turned and faced O’Malley. Worn and faded jeans, a green T-shirt from some pub, and black motorcycle boots: Callan O’Malley was pretty much what Terri had expected. What she had not expected was Callan O’Malley’s gender.

“Hi,” she managed without embarrassing herself.

“Hi there.” There was a smile on the woman’s face. “Just call me O’Malley.” It sounded like a soft-spoken order. O’Malley didn’t take her eyes off Terri. “Hey, Maria, Terri’s next beer is on my tab.”

Maria caught Terri’s eye and winked. “You got it, baby,” she answered as she set the new round of beers on the counter.

“You know, if Gato ever heard the way you talk to me, he’d kill me.”

“Hell, O’Malley, he knows I love you. He’s just glad he found me first and not you.”

Terri watched O’Malley laugh and take the bottles of beer.

O’Malley flashed a grin at Maria and turned to Terri. “I’ll see you around.”

Struck mute by the woman standing beside her, Terri nodded, and then the woman was gone. Terri had seen a lot of women around the bikers, but never one who was obviously more than decoration for the back of a bike. Mildly stunned, she turned her focus back to the bar and the fresh bottle of beer sitting in front her.

Maria chuckled. “You know, this is the first time I’ve seen you speechless.”

“I’m having an off day,” Terri protested, then lapsed into silence.

“Don’t worry about it. Just drink your beer and relax.” Maria tossed the empty bottles into a trash can and turned back to wipe down the counter. The crowd was pretty low-key for a Wednesday night—mostly bikers and their partners, who would drink, get drunk, and try to make it home in one piece. One thing she could say for them was that, for the most part, they followed the rules. It was the Friday night rednecks who were more trouble than they were worth. She couldn’t keep them out, and they seemed too stupid to not show up where they were most obviously not wanted. When she had left her life in the Air Force nine years earlier, her only desire was to own a bar, to be her own boss. When business was good, she couldn’t imagine any other life. When chaos reigned, she wondered why the hell she didn’t sell and get out.

The sound of an open palm striking flesh ripped her from her thoughts, and she looked around sharply. The sight of Terri leaning heavily against the bar, her hair hiding her face, was almost enough to propel Maria over the bar. Only exercising every bit of her restraint kept her in place. She was no match for the stocky man with whom Terri lived, and there were some things in a biker’s society in which she had no place.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Trey Marks demanded of Terri. “You’re late.” He grabbed her arm and turned her to face him.

“I had to walk here,” she explained quietly. “You didn’t pick me up.” She didn’t bother looking up at him. She knew that his face would be almost purple with rage. The pupils of his hazel eyes would be pinpoint small; they always were when he was angry.

Trey glanced at Maria. “Gimme a beer.” He tightened his grip on Terri’s arm. “Well, now that you’re here, you can watch this bitch O’Malley. She’s cheating, and you’re going to help me catch her.”

Terri squirmed in his grip. “Trey, I don’t know anything about cards,” she said reasonably.

He slapped the back of her head again with his free hand. “She don’t know that. How can you be so fucking stupid?” he asked, as he took his beer from Maria. “She’ll settle up the tab later,” he said casually to Maria as he tugged Terri off her seat. “C’mon, get your butt in gear.”

She didn’t bother to struggle; she knew she’d only get hurt in the process. She allowed herself to be led through the bar, trying to ignore the stares of pity that were flashed in her direction. No one would help her, and she didn’t want them to. That would only make it worse for her later. He half dragged her into the back room where everyone played cards.

It was a tight-fitting room with a round card table and, like the rest of the bar, it smelled of stale smoke and spilled alcohol. Terri sank gratefully into the chair that Trey pointed out. She had a good view of the woman who had bought her beer—which, she realized with an inner groan, was still sitting out on the counter.

Terri watched the cardplayers look at her with a mixture of confusion and welcome. John, Mike, and Gato all knew her and flashed her smiles. O’Malley’s eyes danced with something Terri could not identify.

Maria tapped Terri on the shoulder and handed her the forgotten beer and an opened second bottle. Terri could see the concern on Maria’s face. She shook her head slightly, letting Maria know that she shouldn’t press the issue. Maria pressed her lips together, turned around, and melted back into the mix of patrons.

“Hope you all don’t mind if my lucky charm sits there,” Trey said as he dropped himself back into his chair. He set his beer bottle on the table, completely ignoring the cardboard coasters Maria asked everyone to use.

Gato smiled from somewhere under his mustache. “Hi, Terri.” He looked at Trey. “Hope she brings you better luck than you’ve been having.”

“She will. Now deal, before we’re all as old as you,” Trey snapped back.

Terri kept her eyes on the game, like she was supposed to, but she couldn’t see where O’Malley was cheating. What she did notice was that for every five sips the guys had, the woman drank only once. Terri found herself looking more and more at O’Malley’s face, rather than at her hands. The shortish dark hair was a deep contrast to the light-colored eyes. Every once in a while, Terri caught a glimpse of what looked like small scars on her face, but in the overhead light she couldn’t be certain.

She watched as each pot grew and someone would take the game. Piles of chips seemed to wander around the table. She could feel Trey’s eyes on her from time to time, but all she could do was shrug. She couldn’t see anything that O’Malley was doing that raised suspicion. When she wasn’t disappointing Trey, Terri was aware of O’Malley’s eyes on her. She knew it was going to be a long night.

After two hours, Terri’s butt was nearly numb and she had to go to the bathroom. As she rose, she watched in disbelief as Trey pushed all of his remaining chips into the middle of the table. The other players looked at him for a second, and then at their cards. Gato folded immediately. Terri hid a smile. Maria would let him bet only so much and if he lost more, there was hell to pay. Mike followed Gato’s example and let his cards fall to the table, disgust written on his face. Terri knew he hated to lose to Trey.

Trey’s face took on a triumphant expression. He looked at O’Malley.

Her cool eyes regarded him for a moment, then she leaned forward. "You're bluffing," she said, and pushed a stack of chips forward. "I'll see your bet, and raise you." She shoved her remaining chips into the pot.

"Terri, gimme what you got on you," Trey demanded.

Terri opened her mouth to protest. What she had in her purse was supposed to go toward rent.

"You got yourself into this, son. You match it, not the lady." O'Malley's voice was too flat not to be dangerous.

"She's mine, she'll do what I tell her," Trey snapped back.

Terri had no choice. She pulled the money from her jeans and handed it to Gato, who handed it over to Trey.

Trey tossed the money into the pile. He grinned and laid down his cards. "Two pair." Rubbing his hands together, he started to pull the chips toward him.

"Not so fast, slick." O'Malley set down one card, the jack of spades, followed by a nine, then another jack, and a second nine, and finally one more jack. "Now, where I come from, mine is bigger than yours." She reached out, grabbed the stack of cash, and quickly counted it. "And you're still short. I raised you a grand, and there's only five hundred here. What else you got?"

"I ain't putting up my bike," Trey whined.

O'Malley shrugged. "I didn't make the rules to the game, that was you. You said all bets paid at the end of the night."

"One more game to give me a chance to pull even," Trey suggested.

O'Malley shook her head. "Not with the way you play. Besides, you got nothing to bet since you won't put up the bike." O'Malley pushed out of her chair. "You got 'til tomorrow to come up with the other five hundred."

Trey shook his head. "I gotta pay rent. I can't come up with five by tomorrow."

O'Malley looked at Terri and saw that she was close to tears. She turned her attention back to Trey, who looked like a little kid playing biker. "Looks like she earned rent and you lost it." O'Malley stepped away from the table.

"One punch, winner take all," Trey said loudly.

"You got nothing left to bet," O'Malley reminded him.

"I got her." Trey pointed at Terri. "Or are you just some chicken-shit, yellow bitch?" he taunted.

O'Malley knew he was trying to push her buttons. She couldn't believe he would bet his girlfriend. A part of her wanted to just call it even, but another part of her knew that if she backed down, her credibility was shot. She had spent most of the previous eight hours sizing him up. Mentally she calculated how much he'd had to drink and decided that it was worth the risk. The worst that could happen was that she would lose and wake up with a hell of a headache in the morning. When it came to biker society, there was no disgrace in accepting a challenge and losing. It was the running with your tail between your legs that usually got you into trouble.

John, Mike, and Gato looked at Trey and O'Malley like they had both lost their minds. A grim look on his face, Mike slipped out of the room and went running to Maria.

Terri sat openmouthed at the bet, obviously stunned.

O'Malley looked at her and noted, not for the first time, the marks on her arm. They looked suspiciously like the imprint of a hand. Looking back at Trey's sneering face, she made her decision. "Get your ass outside, son. One punch, winner takes all."

Word didn't take long to travel around the bar. By the time the duo made it outside past the edge of the parking lot, there was a crowd following. As O'Malley peeled off her leather vest, Maria stepped in front of her.

“*Chica*, do you really know what you’re doing?” she asked in a low tone. O’Malley met her eyes and nodded just once. “Okay. Just so you know, if you go down in one, the guys won’t let him get in any more shots. He’s done that before.”

“Has he ever lost?” O’Malley asked casually as she handed over the vest.

“No,” Maria answered grimly.

O’Malley’s smile was almost frightening in its intensity. “Good. I get to be the first.”

Maria folded the vest over her arm and walked back to Gato. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders as O’Malley and Trey stepped up to face each other. Terri stood next to Mike and watched through half-closed eyes.

Trey grinned as he popped the knuckles of both hands. “You ready to hurt like hell?”

O’Malley stood in front of him, totally relaxed. “Back out or punch me, but shut up.” She watched his grin fade and knew instinctively when he was going to throw the punch by his squint. O’Malley took the blow on the side of her head, just under her left ear. She let her head snap to the side, let the force of the punch flow through her rather than trying to resist it. Her knees wanted to give out as her world started to spin, but she kept her feet. After a moment, she straightened.

As she looked at him, Trey’s face lost its gloating. For just an instant, O’Malley thought she saw fear in his eyes. She had no doubt that he’d never seen anyone still standing after he’d hit them. She let him stew in his fear for a long moment before her fist moved. She did not squint, tense, or otherwise telegraph her blow. She connected full force on the point of Trey’s chin. She knew Trey’s mistake was relying on the strength of his arm; she’d used the force of her entire body. The only way she even knew that she had moved was the pain that flared in her fist.

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Terri watched Trey as his eyes rolled back; he blinked once, his eyelids closed, and then he collapsed into the dirt. His head bounced once on the hard ground, and he lay still. Mike gave a low whistle, while others watched with a mixture of disbelief and outright joy. Terri’s stomach sank to her ankles. She was free of Trey, but she didn’t know O’Malley from Adam.

She started toward Trey, but Mike stopped her with a gentle hand on her shoulder. “He played the game, Ter, and he lost. There’s nothing you can do about it. Even if you wanted to go back to him, you couldn’t,” he explained. “You better go with Maria for now. Everything will get sorted out in a little bit.”

Terri let herself be guided toward Maria and Gato. A couple of bikers checked to make sure Trey was still breathing, then struggled to pick him up. She knew someone would make sure he lived through the night.

Maria took her arm and led her back into the bar. “You okay?” Maria asked as Gato looked over her shoulder.

“What just happened?” Terri asked through her daze.

O’Malley leaned against the bar next to Terri. “I think I just broke my hand on his face,” she groaned. “Hey, Maria, you think I could get some ice for my hand, my face, and my drink?”

“Well, O’Malley, I see your hand and your face, but I sure don’t see your drink,” the bar owner teased.

“I knew I forgot to do something. How ’bout an Irish whiskey and Coke, tall glass, and whatever Terri’s drinking. She looks like she needs one,” O’Malley said as she sank down onto the stool.

“You got it, but only one. You took one hell of a shot out there. I’d hate for you to survive that and die ’cause I gave you too much to drink.” Maria smiled to take the sting out of her words.

“I’ve got a thick Irish skull and I’ve been hit harder.” O’Malley suddenly sounded quite somber. “But not by much,” she admitted.

Maria whipped two bar towels from their cubbyhole, filled them with ice, tied them off with thick rubber bands, and handed them to O'Malley, who set one ice-filled towel on her right hand and pressed the other against the side of her head. Maria stifled a laugh as Gato expressed his merriment.

"Hey, O'Malley, don't ever hit me okay?" he managed as Maria glared at him.

"Just don't piss me off, Gato, and all will be fine," O'Malley answered. She shifted her gaze to Maria, watching as she placed the requested drink in front of her. A straw floated in the glass and with both of her hands occupied, O'Malley finally had to laugh at her predicament. She closed her eyes.

"You okay, O'Malley?" Terri's voice was soft with shock.

"Yeah. Just wondering what I've gotten myself into, that's all. You okay?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking the same thing, actually."

Maria cut in. "Technically, Trey's the one who got you both into this. You want a beer, Terri, or something stronger?"

"Just a beer. Anything stronger might kill me," she admitted slowly. "Or give me enough courage to kill that son of a bitch."

"Nah, don't kill him. Just take a good look at him after he wakes up. With that headache, I'm sure he's gonna wish he was dead." Maria chuckled. "It's gonna quiet down here quick enough, so I'll drive you two wherever in O'Malley's truck, and Gato will follow us." She held up a hand to forestall any arguments. "Neither of you can drive safely. You have a dented skull, O'Malley, and Terri, you just worked how many hours and walked the five miles here? I'm betting you're wiped out."

"Yeah," Terri admitted.

"Besides, this is a good excuse for me to leave early and have some extra time with my wild man." Maria leered at Gato.

"C'mon, Maria. Too much info," O'Malley groaned.

"Too much info, my ass. You stayed at my place how long after you got out? If I remember, her name was...Adrian?"

"Her name was Alice. Okay, I get the message." O'Malley relented and tried to smile. The smile stopped short. "Ouch."

"You big baby."

Even in her stunned state, Terri had to laugh, but she did so softly. They finished their drinks, and then the group slipped out of the bar. Terri noticed the stares; they were hard to miss. She could see the questions as if they had been written on paper: who was this O'Malley and what was Terri going to do now? *Funny, I'm having those same questions. Go figure*, her brain piped up in a tone dripping with sarcasm. She silently followed the group out to the truck.

"Maria, you know where Terri here lives?" O'Malley asked as she eased into the truck.

"Yeah. Why?"

"We stop there first, get her stuff, and then hit my place. I do not want to have to go there after he wakes up. I don't like getting hit in the head that much."

Maria chuckled and nodded. She waited until Gato came over with the car and told him of the change in plans. He agreed, and they set off. Maria drove, with Terri in the middle and O'Malley resting against the passenger door.

"How much stuff you got, *chica*?" Maria asked to have some noise during the trip.

"Not much, just my clothes and some small things. Trey's not real big on collecting stuff, you know," Terri answered quietly. She watched the road signs as they got closer to the rental house that she had called home for the past thirteen months. It wasn't much, but it was dry and the roach population was under control. She'd seen worse.

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It didn't take Terri long to pack her things into the back of O'Malley's truck. She hadn't been lying when she said she didn't have much. They loaded three baskets of clothes and two boxes of books and personal stuff.

O'Malley looked around. She'd seen homeless people who had more personal belongings. *No one should have to live like this.* In a little under half an hour, the group was back on the road and driving to O'Malley's.

O'Malley was sulking, staring out the window and dealing with the pain in her hand and face when she felt the smaller woman's head lean against her shoulder. She looked over without moving her shoulder much. Terri was dead to the world. For a second, she let herself enjoy the odd moment. She caught sight of Maria's sidelong glance.

"Now that's cute. Brings back some old memories," Maria said quietly.

"Yeah, it does. Thanks for your help tonight." O'Malley ignored Maria's sigh and changed the subject. "Just accept the thank you and let it go, Maria."

"I will not just let it go," Maria hissed. "I know you haven't. Otherwise you wouldn't be here in the middle of all of this."

"Maria, *cariña*, what's done is done. You know why I'm here." O'Malley sounded tired.

"Yeah, I do. I can still be mad," Maria said.

"I'm mad, too, but I can't afford to show it. I'm too close to finishing this."

"But will it make a difference?"

"I don't know, but the payback will more than make up for the 'suck it up and drive on' we've had to do."

"Suck it up and drive on," Maria echoed. "God, I haven't heard that in a long time."

"I haven't said it in a long time," O'Malley said. "Just pull up on the lawn. We'll get her stuff into the house and just pile it somewhere."

Maria pulled into the driveway and rolled the truck onto the cut grass in front of the door. "How's that for service?"

"You are the best, Maria. You get the door, I'll get Sleepy here into the house."

O'Malley managed to rouse Terri enough to get her inside and guide her into the bedroom. She pulled off Terri's shoes and socks, then covered her with the blanket. That done, she returned to the truck and helped Gato and Maria unload Terri's things into the living room. Gato went out to wait in the car.

"You know they're gonna expect you to sleep with her. You own her now," Maria pointed out.

"Yeah, I know, but I'll figure it out later. It'll work out. Right now, all I want is some aspirin and sleep. Now get out of here and go play with your wild man," she teased. The two friends shared a hug at the door, and O'Malley watched until their taillights could no longer be seen before she closed the door and quietly turned the dead bolt. "Now what, genius?" she asked herself.