

[NOTE: Keira, Tavo's and Ray's maid, once had her own subplot. It was cut to lower the word count. This was her first major scene.]

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MONDAY, 3 MAY

Ray smiled at Keira when she hauled open the door. "Trick or treat."

Keira smiled back. "Come on in."

He swept his two duffels off the front step and followed her into the hallway. The cream granite and marble blushed in the afternoon sun. "Still wearing your uniform?"

"I'm used to it. And I'm not too sure who's going to show up."

They stopped in what served as a living room, a two-story open space with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the terrace. The Pacific shimmered pewter on the horizon. The furniture—reproduction Modernist classics, Tavo had told him, very expensive but not very comfortable—had always seemed for show and not use. The huge wall-mounted databoard had four news and three business feeds going. Ray made a note to throw in a couple sports channels.

"You've got bags," Keira said. "Are you staying?"

"Uh-huh. Tavo said if I'm going to do the job, I should have the house." He turned a circle, scanning the space. It looked unchanged but felt empty. "Did he leave anything?"

"Nope. He never had much here, you know. Like, not since the wife stopped coming up." The spin she put on "the wife" turned it into "that bitch." "Am I still working here, or is, um...Salma? Is she coming?"

"She doesn't want to live here. She might visit." Ray was still figuring out how he felt about that. Seven years was a lot of time to flush away, but he wasn't as sad as he figured he ought to be. "Let me dump these, take a look around. You can go back to doing whatever you were doing."

SOUTH

“Can’t while you’re here.” She winked, then turned and strolled toward the open kitchen.

Ray checked out the huge master suite upstairs, the massive walk-in marble tub and open shower, the three other bedrooms and three generous attached baths, the bridge across the open living room, the deck stretching across the rear façade’s full width. Only Keira’s room was closed and locked.

After admiring the view from the deck for a few minutes, Ray went to work on the hidden storage spaces. Keira had told him about most of them, niches in the walls or floors or false backs in closets. He remembered the gun cabinet in the downstairs office from a past visit: the three M4A5 carbines, four Uzis and the AA-12 automatic shotgun were still there. The safe under the living-room hearth still held a tall stack of euros and a bundle of unused MasterCard and Visa cards with fake names, but the passports were gone. Tavo’s H&K pistol wasn’t in the false-bottom nightstand drawer next to the master suite’s king-sized bed. Well, Ray had figured he’d have to make the place homier.

Ray paused halfway down the floating granite staircase to the ground floor. He had God knew how many emails piled up. He was now in charge of the arms exports, the drug imports, managing the legitimate properties in California, Nevada and Arizona, running the trading firms that laundered the waterfall of money spewed out by the Cartel’s many enterprises in the Southwest, enforcing discipline on a far-flung network of employees and, in his spare time, keeping an eye on U.S. law enforcement. Plus, he had to keep pushing his plan for the future. All the pieces were moving; he needed to ensure his would still be on the board at the end.

He controlled part of an empire. But first, he wanted to sit outside and have a drink.

Ray leaned back in the patio chair next to the infinity pool’s shallow end, laced his fingers behind his head and turned his face to the sun. The air here was so clean, it confused his lungs. The sky was blue, not milky tan. The streets were freshly paved and silky smooth. Nearly all the storefronts were full. Three brand-new Mercedes SUVs sat in the driveway across the street.

This wasn’t America...but he’d take it.

“Can I get you something?”

Lance Charnes

Keira's sudden and silent appearances still startled Ray. He found her slightly behind him, her hands folded in front of her, her head tilted slightly to one side. "Um...tequila?"

"*Blanco, reposado or añejo?*"

He wasn't sure what was more unnerving; that Tavo's bar (his bar now) had so many choices, or that Keira could rattle them off so casually. "What would you drink?"

She glanced to the sky, briefly closed her eyes in the sun, then returned her steady gaze to him. "It's early. A *blanco*. I'll get you something nice."

Ray watched her go, her hips swaying gently as she walked. All this, and a maid. A *bot* maid. Life was going to be good. Unless he screwed up; then, life would be short.



Keira watched Ray from the bar as she poured his drink and one for herself. He wouldn't complain. He was overwhelmed, she could tell, but that was okay. He'd figure it out soon enough.

She needed to nail down her position before he did.

Tavo was gone and probably wouldn't come back; he'd either stay *capo*, or he'd die. That was too bad. She'd liked him in a sort of distant-uncle kind of way. He'd scold the macho jerks who talked dirty to her in Spanish, thinking she didn't understand, which she did now (three years in a house surrounded by Spanish, you learn Spanish). He'd always been a perfect gentleman around her no matter how hard she'd tried, which had been inconvenient. It kept her safe but didn't move her much closer to that surf shop she'd planned in Australia.

Maybe Ray would be more useful.

She carried the two glasses to the terrace table and smoothed his down in front of him. "Gran Dovejo Blanco," she explained. "You'll like it."

He held the glass up to the sun, said "hm," then hefted it toward her in a toast. "Here's to moving up."

"To moving up." She returned his gesture, then sipped at her drink. It smelled peppery but tasted like citrus and something sort of like honey. Nothing like that cheap crap she used to drink with her friends on the beach after dark before she came here. In a way, she'd already moved up a little. She had a job and some

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money, and she was growing up, which her old friends hadn't managed yet.

Ray had already finished his glass. He now watched her over the rim, his brain ticking behind his eyes, maybe trying to measure her. She smiled, stepped to the pool's edge, squatted and trailed the fingers of her free hand through the water. *Perfect.*

"So," he asked. "How does this work?"

Keira wet her lips with the tequila one more time—she needed to stay completely clear-headed—and continued to swish the water. The pool was one of the few things that made the housekeeping bearable. If nothing else, she'd stake her claim to that. If things worked out...well, Australia might get a lot closer. "I can stay, right?"

"Sure. If you want."

She watched the ripples roll across the pool's surface. She could already feel it on her skin. "Mind if I swim?"

Ray shrugged. "Go for it." His eyes and face were still calm. He probably expected her to rush back into the house to put on a swimsuit.

Keira crossed to the table, picked a place behind the chair opposite Ray's and set down her drink. She swiped the remote from the table, aimed and faded the pool's midnight-blue bottom to a duck-egg blue almost matching the sky. "That's what that does," she said as she handed Ray the remote.

"Okay, here's how this works. You know how much I'm paid. I'd like a raise. Not a big one, but I work hard and do a good job and it's, like, time for a raise." While she spoke, she pulled off her black ballet slippers, using the chair back for balance. "You pay me on Friday. If the money's not in my account by Saturday, I'll ask you about it." She reached behind her neck to push down her dress' zipper, then behind her back to pull it down the rest of the way. "If it's still not there Sunday, I'll ask again. If it's not there Sunday night, I won't be here Monday morning and you get to figure out where everything is. Okay?"

Ray's eyes locked on her elbows, imagining what her hands were doing. "Okay."

"*Maha.*" Keira shrugged the black dress off her shoulders, let it slide over her hips, stepped out and draped it carefully over the chair back. Dry cleaning was expensive. "I shop for food and house stuff. If you want something, put it on the list on the fridge

Lance Charnes

screen. I give you the receipts, you pay me right then. If you don't, well, no more food. Understand?" He stared at her lacy black bra. "Ray?"

After a moment, he shook his head hard, tried to focus on her face. "Uh, yeah, fine."

She smiled at him, a reward, and kept smiling as she slipped her black thong down her legs and laid it on her dress. "I deal with the pool guy and the landscapers and the window washer and, like, anyone who fixes stuff. I pay them with a credit card. I give you the bill every month, and you pay it. If you don't? It's like, don't go swimming." She flicked the bra straps off her shoulders. "Got that?"

She had to give him props. He'd gotten it together and now watched her like she was a stripper on a stage, interested but trying to be cool. Good. Tavo always looked a little freaked every time she'd stripped in front of him.

Ray shifted in his seat, swallowed. "Yeah. Yeah, I got it."

"*Bindaas.*" She unhooked her bra, dropped it on her dress, then unbuckled her watch and set it next to her glass. Ray seemed to be memorizing her body. That was fine. Being naked in front of a guy was just like wearing another costume.

Keira turned and padded to the pool, stepped onto the top riser. The water felt delicious on her calves. She loved the water. She'd grown up in it, living just a few blocks from Huntington Beach, riding her surfboard or boogie board every spare minute until the water got too gross to touch. She looked over her shoulder at Ray. "You can swim with me if you want."

His eyebrows jumped up his forehead. He swiveled in his chair to make it easier to watch. "*Chica*, if I get in there with you, we'll be doing more than swimming, you know?"

Perfect. It helped that he was cute, big and strong with that Aztec-warrior face like on the History Channel. She dropped to the next step, the water surging over her knees, then smiled back at Ray. "Well, come on in, then. The water's yummy."