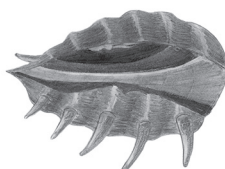


TIME ENOUGH

(Preview)

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Between Two Evils Series
The 3rd Disaster



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CHAPTER I
Tego: Behind Bars



It's a cold, rainy Saturday night, and the trendy San Francisco nightclub is packed. I watch a guy in a suit shadow a redhead wearing a skirt so short that it makes the word mini seem huge. He attempts to get her attention without actually approaching her, but she doesn't seem to notice.

Give it up, dude. She's not interested.

I take a sip of expensive cheap beer, feeling morose and under-dressed. The music is too loud and the place smells of rancid oil and stale liquor, none of which is doing much for my mood.

Mierda, I hate pick-up joints.

Dave sits opposite me, texting friends from work, trying to convince them to join us.

Only an idiot would go out in this shitty weather.

I glance over at a short, curvaceous brunette in a blue

sweater dress. She's standing at the crowded bar with her back to me, shifting her weight in time to the music and chatting with a waif-like friend. I like the way her stiletto heels accentuate the sway of her hips, a motion not unlike waves breaking on the beach. She looks cheerful and friendly, which is rare in a place like this, but she's not really my type.

When was the last time you met someone who was your type?

It's a stupid question, and I chastise myself for asking it.

Isabel is dead, mae. Let her go.

The woman at the bar turns her head as if sensing my gaze, and I realize I'm still staring at her butt. I jerk my head up and our eyes meet for a split second, and then I look away, feeling like a pervert.

Dave sees me flinch and cranes his neck around to see what's going on. He nods at stiletto heels and turns back to me. "Shit, Tego. You gotta make eye contact, or you'll never get to first base with her."

I pick up my empty glass and coax out the last few drops. "Yeah, well, she's not going to be much good at baseball in those heels."

He shakes his head and refills my glass. "You don't have to marry her, dude." He scoots his chair around so he can see the bar without straining his neck. "Just keep your eyes on her for a minute, and when she looks at you, nod or smile. Acknowledge her. If she's interested, you'll know." He follows my gaze. "But you might avoid staring at her ass. She could take that the wrong way."

"Is there a right way?"

"Christ, you're pathetic." He looks around the bar. "Here, watch." He demonstrates with a woman sitting alone at the bar. The skin-tight silver dress she's wearing has a slit down the front, all the way from her neck to her navel—which I have to admit looks pretty damn hot.

She glances at Dave and then crosses her arms and looks away.

"Wow," I say. "Impressive."

“Okay, not her. She’s probably here on someone else’s nickel.” He tries a woman on the other side of the dance floor.

It takes a minute, but he gets a shy nod.

“See?” He grins at me. “After that, it’s like taking candy from a baby. Go tell her she has an electric smile and offer to buy her a drink. Before you know it, you’ll be in her pants.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“What if you don’t want to what?” His voice is exasperated.

“Be in her pants.”

“Jesus, Tego. What is it with you and girls?” He shakes his head and then frowns. “And go easy on the beer. We have to be at that damn Kirkland dog and pony show tomorrow at eight.”

“Yeah, I remember. If it’s anything like the one where I met you, being hung-over might improve it.”

“If they come through with my start-up funding, I don’t care whose ass I have to kiss—and it can’t hurt that my last name is Kirkland, either.”

“So you couldn’t dig up anyone there you knew?”

“Nope. The whole show is run by some reclusive old dame. Wouldn’t even talk to me on the phone.” He smacks me on the shoulder. “Hey, what do you say you join me at the new company? Get in on the ground floor. Head up IT.”

“Thanks for the offer, *mae*, but that’s not really my thing. And besides, I’m trying to preserve the rainforest, not bottle it.”

“Well think about it, anyway. Shit, with all that cash we’d make, you could buy the whole fucking jungle.”

I laugh and then glance over at stiletto heels. “So how did you learn all this stuff about money and women?”

“Same way you get to Carnegie Hall.”

“Shit, I’m screwed—and not in the way you’re hoping.”

“Ah, come on. Stop being such a killjoy. I know you miss the ex-girlfriend, but you have to let it go. She dumped you, dude, and it was a long time ago. Get over it.”

“Yeah, I know. You told me that before.”

He smacks me on the shoulder. “Hey, nothing like a little tits and ass to make you forget your troubles, right? You just

got to put some heart into it. You're a good catch, bro. Smart, attractive, and available—same as me.”

I chuckle and look out into the crowd.

Maybe I could try a little harder.

Dave bumps me with his elbow and gestures toward a platinum blond at a nearby table. “Pussy Galore, if ever I saw her.” He lets his gaze wander leisurely down the woman's long legs—a predilection that we both share—and I nod in appreciation.

She's perched on the edge of a barstool surrounded by guys wearing untucked dress shirts and too much jewelry. I can see her goblet of white wine towering above their short, sweating glasses of Scotch. She looks Russian, or maybe Czech, and I'm willing to bet she speaks with an accent and feels just as out-of-place as her tall wineglass.

Dave lets out a soft whistle. “Look at those hooters. Woo-wee. A man could get lost in there for weeks.”

I laugh. Dave likes his women thin, boarding on starvation, so he doesn't see a lot of cleavage. The lithe but buxom Russian must be quite a treat for him.

I, on the other hand, prefer more curves, and to my eye, the blonde's willowy frame and large breasts make her look like a Barbie doll who might lose her balance at any moment and topple over.

The Bond Girl bounces a spiked-heel shoe on the toes of her bare foot, looking bored. In the minute or so we've been watching, no one has acknowledged her, let alone spoken to her, and I feel a twinge of sympathy.

Living in a foreign country is rough, especially at first.

But despite Dave's persistent attention, she hasn't given him a single sideways glance. We watch her take a sip of wine and run her tongue over the rim of the glass.

“Oh I could definitely do her.” He turns to me. “Think she's a natural?”

I shake my head, more thinking that her legs look too tanned for cold, foggy San Francisco. “Not a chance.”

“Yeah, you're probably right.”

Pussy Galore finally glances over at us, tosses her sheet of silvery hair, and slips her hand around the well-muscled arm of the gorilla sitting next to her.

Dave laughs and looks away. “Your loss, baby.”

He takes a drink of beer and nods toward the curvaceous woman at the bar. “Stiletto heels is checking you out again. Nice tits, and I bet she’s a screamer.”

“Well, if she is, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“That’s the spirit.” He motions with his chin. “Why don’t you go say hello? Invite her to dance.”

“You know I don’t like to dance, and anyway, she’s not my type. Really. If you would just stop pushing me—”

The cloying scent of vanilla fills my nose. I turn and look up into the face of the woman in the blue dress. She’s wearing too much makeup, and there’s a tiny smudge of red lipstick on her very white teeth.

“Hi.” She smiles, clutching her drink like a life jacket on the Titanic. “I’m Kim. I hope I don’t seem too forward, but my roommate and I—” She glances at the bar, and her friend waves with the fingertips of one hand.

She looks back at us and takes a shaky breath, shoring up her resolve, I think. “Well, we were wondering if you’d like to join us for a drink?”

I stare up at her. “Uh—”

“We’d love to,” Dave says. “But why don’t you join us? Next round’s on me.” He smiles like a shark. “I’m not really this tall, I’m just sitting on my wallet.”

I groan. That’s the third time I’ve heard that line tonight.

She laughs self-consciously. “Sure. Thanks.” She looks over at her roommate and nods, and then sits down next to me, still clinging to her curvy glass.

We watch her skinny friend saunter across the crowded nightclub, steering her mixed drink ahead of her. She sits down on the other side of Dave and smiles. “Hi. I’m Lisa.” She smells of cigarette smoke and too much perfume.

“I’m Dave. And this is my buddy, Tego. Like Lego, only

with a T—and you should see his brick.”

I cringe, but they both laugh.

Stiletto heels turns to me. “Nice to meet you, Tego with a T.” I watch her red lips slide across her perfect teeth and then meet her gaze. She tips her head to the side and offers me her hand. “You have gorgeous brown eyes.”

I take her warm, soft hand. “Thanks. The pleasure is definitely mine. You have an electric smile.”

“That’s so sweet.” She bites her lip. “You have an unusual name. Where are you from?”

I glance down, wondering why she’s still holding my hand, and then realize that she’s waiting for me to answer.

“Uh, we’re up from the South Bay.” I slip my hand out of hers and pick up my empty beer. “You?”

Dave let’s out a snort. “He’s from Costa Rica, but don’t let that fool you: he speaks English better than I do.” He leans forward and gives her a conspiratorial wink. “But he has a bit of a Latin temper. Likes to call the shots in bed, if you know what I mean.”

I glare at him but he ignores me.

At precisely that moment, the music cuts out, and the club falls silent.

From behind me, I hear a woman’s voice, clear in the unexpected hush. “Just a sec, and I’ll walk with you.”

My insides convulse.

The music starts again, and I’m surrounded by the hubbub of fifty people talking at once.

I twist around and watch two women in long black coats pull up their collars and slip out through the heavy wooden doors.

Oh my god, it’s her!

I stand up, my heart racing so fast I feel lightheaded, and tug my jacket off the back of the chair. “I’m... sorry, but I have to go.” I glance at Dave. “It’s her. It’s Isabel.”

“What the fuck, Tego? The girls just sat down.” He gives me an annoyed look. “And how the hell are you going to get

home—your car’s at my place?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’ll text you.” I look at the woman I’m jilting. “I’m sorry. Believe me, it has nothing to do with you. In fact, you look absolutely ravishing in that dress, and that’s no pick-up line.”

Her eyes get big, and then she blushes.

I take two twenties out of my wallet, drop them on the table, and jog out into the night, my heart pounding.

The rain has stopped, but the pavement is damp, and steam billows up in the cold night air. The clouds have cleared and a sliver of the moon is visible hanging above the city.

I glance both ways down the narrow street. Warehouses and small cafés, closed this late in the evening, line the damp sidewalks. A block away, on the opposite side, the two women are walking arm in arm, chatting and laughing. Images of Isabel flash through my mind: strolling up the beach in the billowing dress, sitting with her chin on her knees in the sand, throwing her arms around me in the deep water. I strain to hear her voice, but they are too far away.

I hurry across the empty street and follow them down the sidewalk, jogging to catch up, but trying not to look like I’m stalking them. My hands are shaking, and I feel a little sick. I have never wanted anything more than I want that woman to be Isabel.

The two friends stop for a moment and glance back. I force myself to slow down.

Take it easy. Think. What are you going to say when you catch up? What if she doesn’t recognize you?

They disappear into a parking garage.

Shit.

I consider following them into the cavernous place, but decide against it. Instead, I step out into the street and look for a taxi. There’s a boutique hotel half a block down with a cab sitting out front. The inside of the car is dark but the light on top is glowing. I jog down the sidewalk and knock on the passenger-side window.

A startled face peers out at me, and a moment later, the window goes down. “Yeah? Need a cab?”

“Please. And quick.”

The lock clicks, and I get in the front seat and fumble on the seatbelt. “Thanks. Make a U-turn and wait down by the flower stall, please. She’ll be coming out of the parking garage across the street.”

He gives me a skeptical look, but complies.

We sit in silence for a minute, a couple of errant raindrops splatting on the windshield.

He clears his throat. “You sure this be a good idea?”

“Yeah. She’s my girlfriend. We got separated a couple of years ago, and I’ve been trying to find her ever since.” Even to me, it sounds lame.

“Yeah, right. You not some stalker are you?”

I sigh and pull out my last twenty. “No. I’m just desperate. Please?”

He stares at my face for a moment and then takes the bill. “Okay. You got three minutes and then I’m goin’ back to my nap. Save you the embarrassment.”

Headlights cut into the foggy night and slip down onto the wet pavement. I squint into the darkness, trying to see who’s driving. The car stops for a moment at the top of the exit ramp, and the lone security lamp shines directly into the front seat. It’s Isabel, and she’s alone.

“That’s her!”

The cab driver puts the car in gear.

“No, wait! Give her a second. I don’t want to scare her.”

The guy shakes his head. “What you gonna do when she gets home? Wait outside all night? She gonna call the cops, and they gonna put your ass in jail.” He looks over at me, trying to decide if I’m a serial killer or something.

“I just want to talk to her.” I’m surprised by the desperation in my voice.

He puts on his headlights and eases out into the street, staying half a block behind Isabel’s car. Ten minutes later, we watch

her turn into an apartment complex and disappear behind a two-story building.

The cabbie pulls over to the curb. “You sure you wanna do this, mister? Ain’t no way you gonna get another cab tonight. You betta off comin’ back tomorrow when it’s light and ain’t no one gonna be thinkin’ you some rapist.”

He’s right, of course.

But something in me refuses to be reasonable. I have been looking for Isabel for almost five years, desperately searching for any trace of her, and now that I’m this close, I can’t take the chance that she’ll slip away.

“You seem like a nice kid. Why don’t you just call this thing off, and I’ll take you back to where I found you. No charge.” He holds out my twenty.

I stare at it for a moment and then shake my head.

“Your ass, mister.”

I open the door and hop out into the cold, foggy night. “Thanks for the ride.”

The cabbie watches me for a minute, still frowning, and then makes a U-turn and heads back the way we came, talking with the dispatcher.

I walk down the driveway until I come to a dead end, and then shut my eyes and listen.

Somewhere close by, I can hear a warm engine ticking in the still night air. I move toward the sound, wondering how she could have disappeared so quickly.

It doesn’t take me long to find her car. I cup my hands and peer into the driver’s side. It’s dark and empty.

I turn and look at the well-lighted apartment buildings, but there is no sound or movement. I decide to check on the other side of the parking garage, my heart racing now that I realize I may have lost her.

I stay in the shadows, keeping my back against the stucco structure, but moving quickly. I slip around the end of the building and plow into the woman I’ve been following.

She shrieks and falls back, stretching out her arm as if

holding a gun.

I raise my hands. "Sorry!" Up close, she doesn't even look that much like Isabel. "I thought you were someone el—"

And then my eyes are on fire, the burning agony spreading into my nose, mouth, and lungs. I collapse onto the muddy grass, struggling to draw a breath, my eyelids swollen shut and my whole body writhing in pain.



Two hours later, I'm hunched over on a cracked plastic chair in the Taraval Police Station when Dave walks in. His hair is disheveled and he's as pissed off as I've ever seen him.

Can't say I blame him.

He takes one look at my muddy shirt and swollen face and softens his expression a bit. "Shit, Tego. What happened?"

I grab my jacket and stand up. "Ask me tomorrow."

He glances over at the chubby police officer behind the counter. "He free to go?"

She puts down her pencil and crosses her arms, glaring at us over the top of her glasses. "Yes. The woman didn't press charges. Seems the cabbie who dropped him off convinced her it was an honest mistake." She looks pointedly at me. "But I suggest you stop following unfamiliar women home late at night, Mr. Nadales."

I swallow hard and nod. "I think I got that part."

She shrugs and goes back to her paperwork.

"Thanks for coming," I say to Dave. "And sorry about, uh, interrupting." I slip on my jacket and start coughing, hacking so hard my eyes water.

He shifts his weight and exhales. "If you're looking for sympathy, you'll find it between shit and syphilis in the dictionary."

I take a tentative breath. "I guess I deserved that."

"For christsake, Tego, why'd you go and follow her home?"

I stride out after him into the misty night. "Because I'm a dumbshit."

"You can say that again." He puts his arm around my

shoulder and leads me across the street to his Corvette.

“Sorry,” I say. “And thanks again for the ride.”

“Ah, no worries. You probably saved me from an ugly scene when I had to pick between the two of them in the morning.” He opens the passenger door and waits for me to get in. “And I fucking hate to kiss smokers.”

“Thanks.” I take a deep breath. “Shit, what a night.”

He gets in on the other side. “I can’t wait to meet that ex-girlfriend of yours.” The tires squeal as he whips a U-turn in front of the police station. “She must have been one damned good lay.”