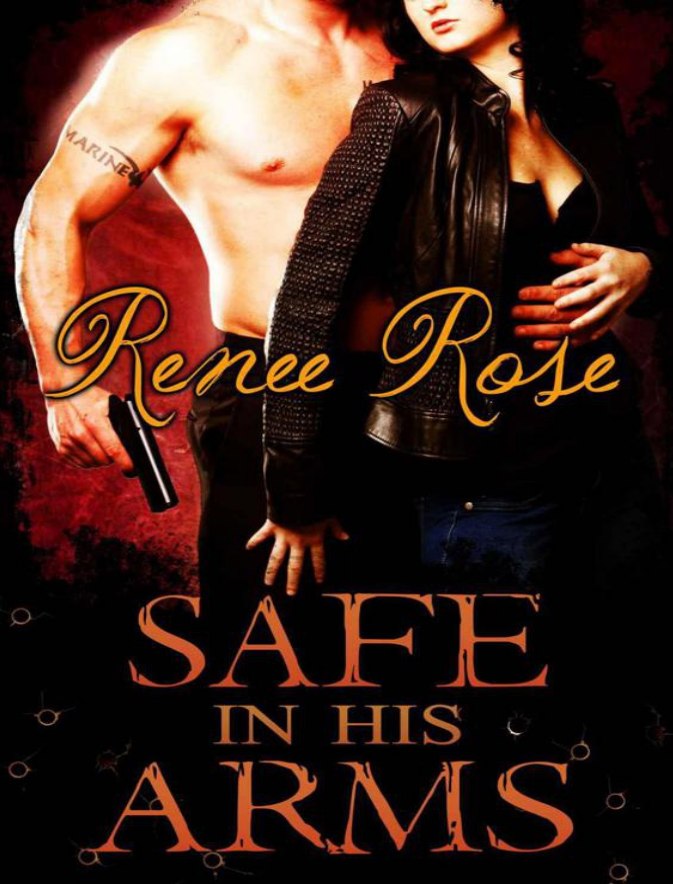




Renee Rose

SAFE
IN HIS
ARMS

Safe in His Arms

By

Renee Rose

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Safe in His Arms

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This book is intended for *adults only*.
Spanking and other sexual activities
represented in this book are fantasies
only, intended for adults.

Prologue

“Squid or jarhead?” Becca asked, flirting with her new friend at the hotel pool bar. She could tell by the way he carried his chest and shoulders he was military, but with three branches in San Diego, it was hard to tell which. They’d been making small talk for the past half hour while she’d been busy putting back too many margaritas.

He grinned. “Jarhead.”

A marine. “And you’re here for the wedding?” They were on Catalina Island, the location for her sister’s wedding, and the entire hotel was overrun with guests for the event.

“Yep, groom’s side,” he said.

“Bride’s,” she said. “I’m the bride’s sister, actually.”

“Ah,” he said, moving his bar stool closer to her. “Shouldn’t you be off at the rehearsal dinner or something?”

“It’s already over. And I can’t stand anymore of the incessant wedding planning talk. I’ve been hearing about this event nonstop for the past 18 months.” She grinned at him, licking the salt off the rim of her fourth margarita. She’d ordered the third to alleviate her nerves at talking to her new good-looking friend, who seemed rather into her. Now she was on the fourth because the bartender had made up an extra by

mistake and gave it to her for free.

“I don’t care about being ‘always the bridesmaid, never the bride,’” she confided, taking an ice cube into her mouth and rolling it around on her tongue. “I’m only 25; I couldn’t care less about finding a husband.” She was only slurring slightly.

He grinned at her, the blond brows and ice blue of his eyes popping under sun-soaked skin. “I don’t care about finding a husband, either.”

She giggled, leaning toward him with tequila-fueled courage to say in a low, conspiratorial tone, “All I really want is a guy who will bend me over and spank me!”

He reached over and cupped the

dewy rocks glass, sliding the margarita out of her grasp. “I’m down,” he said with a flick of his eyebrows.

Chapter One

Seven years later

Becca zipped into a parking space outside the pickup gate at her son's school. Quarter after five. *Shit*. She was fifteen minutes late to get him from the after-school program and Parker was the only kid left waiting. She jumped out of the RAV4 and gave a cheery wave. He lifted his little hand and trudged toward her.

“Thank you!” she called out to the after-school director, giving another exaggerated wave. *Damn*. She hated being late. The stress of it made her

asthma kick in, forcing her to pause by the fence to take a measured inhale. She'd been sitting in a two-hour staff meeting at the private high school where she taught English, and then she'd hit a snarl of five o'clock traffic on the way.

Parker trotted over to her and she led him to the car, opening the back door and helping him take his backpack off.

"How was school, buddy?"

"Fine."

"What did you learn today?"

Parker didn't answer; he stared out the window, digesting whatever six-year-old thoughts were running through his head.

"What do you think Christine will be making for dinner tonight?" Christine

was their new live-in nanny—an older college student who was part nanny, part housekeeper in exchange for room and board.

“I dunno.”

“Do you like Christine?” she prompted.

“Not really.”

She glanced in the rearview mirror, surprised. “You don’t?”

“Huh uh. I don’t think she’s real.”

“What do you mean, you don’t think she’s real?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. She’s not a real nanny.”

Becca bit her lip. It was hard to sift through Parker’s often bizarre

statements. This was the kid, after all, who'd invented an entire identity for his dead father.

“My dad is a spy guy,” he'd been known to tell his friends, zooming around the house throwing karate kicks and pulling pretend guns. Or, “My dad owns this entire apartment building, but we never see him because he's a ghost” or “My dad bought this car for us, but my mom thinks she won it in a drawing.”

That one had hurt the most, for some reason. She'd wanted Parker to appreciate their good fortune at winning the raffle that awarded them a brand new Toyota RAV4, but instead he attributed it to some fantasy he'd created about his father.

The truth was, she knew next to nothing about his father. Parker was the product of a steamy weekend fling with a marine about to be deployed. They'd spent 48 hours together at her sister's wedding, and she hadn't seen him since.

When she'd discovered she was pregnant, she had emailed the address he'd given her, though he'd warned her he wouldn't have much access to it. She never heard back until six months later, when a uniformed officer showed up at her door to inform her Lieutenant Zac Casper had been killed in combat, but if a blood test proved paternity, she qualified for his pension.

* * *

“Have you done this before?” she asked, trying to keep the quaver out of her voice. The adrenalin of anticipation had taken some of her buzz away.

“No, but I think I have the basic premise. Your ass. My hand. Isn’t that about it? Unless you want me to use something other than my hand?” He waggled his eyebrows, fingertips caressing his belt buckle.

Her insides lurched as if she were a tube of toothpaste that had just been squeezed. Fear buzzed just beneath desire. She’d invited a perfect stranger to her hotel room. Just because he knew her future brother-in-law didn’t

mean he wasn't dangerous. And what if she changed her mind and wanted to stop? Would he?

“Ah, I think your hand would be fine for starters. So...ah, how do we —?”

He stopped her with a finger to her lips. “Are you supposed to be in charge here? Or is it me?”

She exhaled, smiling against the pressure of his fingertip. He removed the finger from her lips and stroked it up her throat to the base of her chin.

“Turn around.”

She turned away, relieved to hide her face.

He slid the spaghetti strap of her blouse off one shoulder and ran his

finger from her collarbone to the tip of her shoulder. His lips met her neck at the same moment his hand assaulted her breast, reaching under her arm to pinch her nipple hard enough to make her squirm. Her panties, already damp with anticipation, grew wet enough to bunch between her thighs.

* * *

Becca parked in the garage beneath their apartment building and followed Parker, who'd taken off running to hit the elevator button. He held the door for her with his foot and then hit the 11th floor button repeatedly until the door closed. She bent and kissed the top of his head,

brushing his hair out of his eyes to see his face. “I’m sorry I was late to pick you up.”

He shrugged but didn’t answer, which meant it had mattered to him. *Damn.*

When the elevator door opened, the smell of garlic and ginger wafted from their apartment. Opening the front door, they found Christine standing over the stove, mixing some kind of Asian stir-fry.

“Hi, Becca, hi, Parker!” she sang out over her shoulder, flashing a white-toothed smile. She was an “alternative student,” who had moved to San Diego to get her masters in physiology at UCSD. Becca considered herself very

lucky to have found the help in exchange for the extra room in their apartment, which had been another stroke of luck. They'd somehow managed to get a three-bedroom corner apartment for the price of a one-bedroom, simply because the building manager liked her or took pity on her as a single mom.

“Whoa—is that where we put shoes?” Becca called after Parker, who had already kicked off his Darth Vader sneakers and headed down the hallway to his room.

He raced back, picked up the shoes, and tossed them in the shoe rack she kept by the door, then ran back toward his room. She followed him down the hall to

her own room, stripping out of the button-down blouse and skirt and putting on a fitted t-shirt and a breezy miniskirt.

A loud clatter, like the sound of a pan dropping in the kitchen, made her call out, “Everything okay out there, Christine?”

When she didn’t answer, Becca opened her bedroom door and headed down the hallway, a few steps behind Parker. They both froze when they reached the living area—a man dressed all in black was in the kitchen, his forearm crushing Christine’s neck in a chokehold. Becca clutched Parker behind her and drew in a breath to scream, but her lungs closed, and all she uttered was a whimper.

To her shock, Christine was fighting back with what could only be considered expert and deadly technique. An elbow to the man's ribs, a foot wrapped behind his, and she'd dislodged his balance enough to squirm out of his hold. She reached under the kitchen island and withdrew a pistol.

Becca's mind reeled as she assimilated the fact that her nanny was not a real nanny and she'd kept a gun in Becca's kitchen, where her son might have found it and killed himself. Not that they might not both be killed any moment, anyway.

Christine fired straight at the man's chest, but she must have missed because

he lunged at her, catching her wrist and smashing it on the granite countertop. The dislodged weapon skittered across the floor and went under the oven. Undaunted, Christine picked up a butcher knife and slashed it at him. He did not take a weapon, though the butcher block of knives was in his reach, and he barely avoided a slash to his kidney before he smacked the back of her neck with a karate chop. She fell to her knees, but was up again in a flash.

“Mom!” Parker said excitedly.
“That’s my dad!”

Oh, God, please. Not this. Not now. His overactive imagination was proving dangerous. But the stranger looked up, hearing Parker’s words, and

her heart stopped in her chest. She knew those blue eyes.

There, in her kitchen, the man fighting her new nanny in all-out mortal combat, was Zac, her weekend fling—obviously not dead.

She pressed herself against the wall for support as her lungs closed. Panic swelled and her gums turned numb, the familiar signs she was going to pass out from her asthma attack.

Christine freed herself from Zac and sprinted for the living room, taking the sofa in one leap and kicking out the screen to the open window. Zac reached her and she sent a high kick to his throat. He caught the foot and twisted it,

bringing her weight crashing down to the floor. She scrambled back up, picked up the lamp, and swung it toward his head, smashing it on the coffee table before he tackled her around the waist, both of them plunging out the open window.

* * *

Zac had grabbed the ankle of the fake nanny with one hand, but she was unable to twist to catch her weight with her hands before her head cracked into the brick at a bone-crunching velocity. *Damn.* He'd been trying to take her alive. He hefted her up and through the window, his eyes sweeping the room for other possible dangers. Becca and

Parker were huddled against the wall, looking terror-stricken.

That's my dad.

Parker had known him, which was impossible, since no photos of him existed outside his sealed employment file. Impossible unless Parker possessed the same sense of intuition he did. He pressed two fingers on the faux nanny's carotid artery to feel for a pulse, though he could already tell by the bashed skull she was dead.

Standing up, he tossed the body over his shoulder to carry it to the bedroom. Becca gasped for air with little apparent success. She had serious asthma which, combined with the shock, created an oxygen deficiency. He nudged

behind her knee to bend it forward at the same time he pushed down on her shoulder, effectively sinking her to a crouch on the floor, her back supported by the wall. Giving the nanny's body a bump to readjust the weight, he pushed Becca's head between her knees.

“Parker, find your mom's inhaler.”

The boy obeyed him, looking frightened yet self-possessed, scampering down the hall. Zac entered the nanny's room, tossing the body on the bed and wrapping it up with the comforter.

“Got it!” Parker announced, and his little feet raced back down the hall. Zac poked his head out, but Parker had it

under control, delivering the medication and staring into his mother's pale face. "Are you okay, Mom? Mama? Mommy?"

Zac paused until he saw her nod at her son, then he returned to the nanny's room to search her things. He took the laptop and purse, finding nothing else in her meager belongings. When he returned, Becca was still struggling for breath, looking pale.

He crouched next to her, not wanting to frighten her more by touching her. "Exhale more, as much as you can," he coaxed, keeping his voice as calm and relaxing as he could.

She glared at him as if the suggestion irritated her.

“Listen, it’s just the shock that kicked off the asthma attack. You can get it under control.” He pointed at her low belly, barely touching it with the tip of his finger. “Expand your breath down to here.”

Her brow furrowed and her breath didn’t slow, but he thought she might be attempting it.

“Expand your belly three dimensionally—front and back and both sides, each time you breathe.”

There was a slight slowing of her breath.

“You have all the breath you need,” he assured her, though it probably wasn’t true. “Your body can manage on

what you're getting in and this asthma attack will pass, just like they all do."

A significant calming.

"Parker, I need you to put some things in your backpack," he said to the boy.

"Okay."

The eagerness to please in his voice made Zac's heart contract.

"I need you to get your jammies, a change of clothes, your toothbrush, and a stuffed animal."

"Got it!" Parker cried, running for his room.

"Oh, and maybe a book or toy!" he called after him.

Becca's lips moved, but shock or lack of breath prevented any words from

forming. Still, her color was returning and more air was moving in her chest. “Can you pack a bag?” he asked.

“No!” she gasped, glaring at him.

“Okay. Stay here. Breathe into your upper back now—see if you can expand your ribs behind you, against the wall.” He stepped past her, striding down the hallway to enter her bedroom. She stood and followed him, shaking her inhaler and taking another puff.

“There you go,” he said encouragingly. “Suitcase?”

“What...the...hell...is—”

“I’ll explain later; right now we have to get you out of here.”

He grabbed a few pieces of

clothing out of her dresser and a toothbrush out of her bathroom. “Let’s go,” he said, taking her elbow.

She shook him off. “No fucking—”

He turned and gave her his full attention. “Becca, you are in danger. I need to get you and Parker out of here right now.”

She tried to pull out of his grasp, but he held her fast, bending his head down to speak in a low voice. “I know this is a shock, but I’m here to help. I’m taking you with me now. If I have to take you by force it will scare the hell out of the kid.”

Her jaw opened with indignation, but she closed it again and swallowed, allowing him to steer her out of the

room.

“Let’s go, buddy,” he said to Parker, who was still in his room, stuffing things into his backpack.

Parker raced out of his room, passing them in the hall and wiggling into his Star Wars sneakers.

The smell of smoke drew his attention to the stovetop, which was still on after the nanny-assassin had used the hot frying pan as a weapon. A wooden spoon lay over the burner, smoking. He turned it off and tossed the spoon into the sink. Becca had slipped on sandals and they exited. If he were alone, he’d take the stairs, but he wasn’t sure either Parker or Becca could handle eleven

flights, so he hustled them into the open elevator.

Parker hit the button and the door swished closed.

He crouched down. “Parker, do you know who I am?”

The boy nodded soberly. “You’re my dad.”

“That’s right. And I’m proud of the way you handled yourself back there,” he said, holding a fist out. Parker bumped knuckles with him, looking pleased.

“My mom is upset,” he said.

He met Becca’s eye. She still labored to breathe, her brows knit into an angry furrow, her eyes frantic. “I know.”

In the parking garage, he led them to his SUV, popping the locks with the fob. “Parker, climb in back and stay down on the floor,” he ordered. He opened the passenger side door and helped Becca in, pushing her head down to lie on the seat. She fought him, but he held it firm. “Keep your head down.” She glared up at him. “Please.”

The line between her brows deepened, but there was a settling to her position that indicated compliance. He slammed the door and ran around to his side, jumping in, starting the car and backing out in almost one movement. He hit a button on his phone and pressed it to his ear.

“Yes?” came the careful question, revealing nothing to a wayward caller.

“I need cleanup at 1112 Stonebridge Row, Apartment 1104. A professional was detected on premises and eliminated, civilians have been extracted. I will also need the location of a safe house.”

A pause, and the sound of keys on a computer. “2205 North Angel Blvd. Your fob will open the lock.”

“Roger that.” He hit the power button on his phone to turn it off.

Becca reached for her purse. Guessing her intent, he put his hand over it, holding it closed. “No phone calls. It’s not safe.”

“Why isn’t it safe? What the hell is going on?” Her voice sounded shrill to her ears.

“I’ll explain when we’re in a safe location.”

The possibility her son’s father was a psycho killer or kidnapper or stalker seemed very real. But there was a professionalism to his actions that spoke of more than just military, more like CIA...

My dad is a spy guy.

But could that all be for show? Was he really some nut playing a trick to win her trust?

“What was that song you were

singing while you were fighting? About the grapes of wrath?" Parker asked inanely from the back seat.

Becca had heard no singing during the struggle; in fact, it had been eerily silent, but Zac asked, "You heard that?"

"Yeah."

"It's called 'Battle Hymn of the Republic.' It has a good, steady pace for fighting. Keeps me from getting ahead of myself."

"So you sing a song?"

"Uh huh." The car rolled to a stop. "Let's go," he said, climbing out and opening the door for Parker. She sat up and reached in her purse, digging for her phone. Who should she call? 911?

Her door opened and Zac snatched

the phone from her hand. He slid the back cover off, removed the battery and sim card and tossed it back to her, pocketing the crucial parts. “I said no calls,” he bit out, taking her arm and hauling her out of the car. “If I’m going to protect you, I need you to follow orders.”

She stopped, wrenching her arm free. She had the impression it was only because he allowed it. “What if I don’t want your protection?”

“Not negotiable.”

“So I’m really your prisoner?”

He shrugged, “If you like.”

“And if I don’t?” she demanded.

He lifted his shoulders again, then

looked over at Parker, who had stooped to pick at some grass, knowing with his childlike intuition they needed privacy. “Look,” he said in a low voice. “I know that’s my kid. And I can’t—” He stopped and blinked. “I won’t let anything bad happen to either one of you. Can you believe that?”

He seemed so different now from the man she’d met seven years before—his face was still young, but the pale blue eyes were ancient. Looking into them, she saw a hardness and behind them, a haunted pain.

Against all reason, she did believe him. She gave a single nod.

“Then I need you to follow orders when I give them.”

She frowned. “And if I don’t?”

He leaned forward and looked her directly in the eye, speaking in a voice too quiet for Parker to hear. “Then I’ll spank you till you can’t sit down.”

The instantaneous flip the word “spank” produced in her belly was followed closely by shame, then hot indignation. She gave his chest a hard shove. “How dare you?”

He smirked, but held his hands up in surrender, “I’m sorry. That was the wrong thing to say. Look,” he sighed. “I was just trying to point out you trusted me once, remember? I didn’t hurt you then,” he paused and added with an ironic tone, “—at least not more than

you wanted me to—and I'm not going to hurt you now."

His mention of their "once" opened a fissure in her chest, releasing a flood of confused emotions that literally rocked her on her heels. Her nose burned with the threat of tears. She stared at his chest, the muscles standing out under his t-shirt. She remembered the way he'd looked without a shirt—the lean definition of his pecs covered by a smattering of golden fuzz, the washboard lines of his abs. He'd been like an Adonis. The first lines of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* popped into her mind:

EVEN as the sun with purple-colour'd face

*Had ta'en his last leave of the
weeping morn,*

*Rose-cheek'd Adonis tried him to
the chase;*

*Hunting he lov'd, but love he
laugh'd to scorn;*

And clearly he had scorned love,
because here he was, alive and well
while she'd spent the last six years
single parenting, believing him dead.

She lifted her eyes to his face, a jolt
of electricity hitting her when their eyes
met. Despite her best efforts, he had a
powerful effect on her. His eyes held
compassion for her, as if he knew all the
thoughts she hadn't even begun to sort
through.

“I just don’t understand what’s going on here,” she croaked.

“I know.” His voice was warm, enveloping her in its embrace.

She drew in a breath.

“The less you know, the safer you are, though. I’ll tell what I can when we’re inside—come on.” He placed his hand on her upper back and the contact made her shiver. This time, she let him lead her into the house where he swept through the place, drawing curtains.

“Stay away from the windows,” he warned sharply when she wandered near one. The reminder of his threat outside made her butt flinch and her face burn. She didn’t think he’d meant it, but it was

hard to be sure.

“I’m hungry,” Parker whined and she realized, with a pang, he hadn’t eaten dinner.

Zac stopped his security check as well, as if he, too, had forgotten about feeding Parker. “Okay, I’ll get some food brought in.”

“Can we have ice cream?” Parker asked hopefully.

A smile twitched at the corners of Zac’s mouth. “Sure, bud. What kind do you like?”

“Cookies and cream.”

“You got it.” Zac pulled out his phone and placed a call, walking into the master bedroom to call in private.

Becca searched through the

cupboards in the kitchen, finding no fresh food, but plenty of dry and canned goods. She opened a box of cheese crackers and put them in a small bowl for Parker. “Here you go, kiddo.” Picking up the remote control for the television, she turned it on and searched for a kids’ channel. She didn’t allow Parker to watch much TV, but if ever there was a time to bend the rules, this was it. Finding Nickelodeon, she handed him the remote and followed Zac into the bedroom.

He glanced up at her and ended his call. “Hi.”

She leaned against the door frame. “So what’s going on?”

He took a breath and exhaled. “Okay. I work undercover for an organization we call Black Ops, which falls somewhere between the NSA and the CIA. There is a member of your family who used to work for us and has since disappeared.”

“Who?”

He shook his head.

“You won’t tell me?”

“Can’t tell you,” he corrected.

“Is he dead?” She asked, thinking of her father, who had died when she was fifteen.

Zac shook his head. “We don’t think so. Seven years ago, I was sent to your sister’s wedding in case this person

turned up. They never did, and I guess you know how I spent my time there.”

She stared at him, trying to digest it all. He had known who she was when he picked her up out of that hotel bar. And she'd thought she'd been the one doing the picking up.

“Afterward, I put you on surveillance.”

“Why?” she demanded, the violation making her chest tighten. She pulled her inhaler out of her pocket and took another puff.

He looked at her for a long moment, giving the impression he was deciding what to tell her.

“It would be a lie to say I thought you knew something. The fact is, I knew

you and your family were clean. But I could justify surveillance because of your connection to our target—you know, that they might show up to visit you.”

A cold prickle ran over her skin. “Did they?”

He shook his head.

“Is my sister on surveillance? My mother?”

He looked uncomfortable. “No.”

“So, when you said you could *justify* surveillance—does that mean...” The sensation of violation swept over her again. “Are you like a fucking peeping Tom?”

He winced and she glimpsed the

world-weariness in his eyes again. He shrugged. “I was into you.”

A wave of nausea hit her full force. How she’d fantasized of what it might have been like if Zac hadn’t died—if he’d returned from his deployment and somehow became a part of their lives. But he’d been alive all along. He’d known she’d had his baby and he’d never even tried to make contact. He’d put her on surveillance like a creepy stalker.

She ran for the toilet, her stomach heaving. She stood over it for a moment, but nothing came up. She coughed instead, tears burning her eyes. When she felt a hand on her back, she whirled around and went for him. Attacking with

years of pent-up regrets and deferred desires, she slapped at him, punched his face and chest. When she raked her fingernails down his cheek, he caught her wrists and pinned them behind her back in a loose, but inescapable grasp.

He gazed down at her, the light blue of his eyes full of regret, the scratches on his weathered face turning red. “You are the only woman I was sorry to leave,” he said softly. “Hell—you’re the only woman I even stayed long enough to share breakfast with. And you permanently ruined one-night stands for me.”

She blinked back the tears that made her vision swim. “Great, so I

doubled your usual quotient?" Her bitter words trailed off when he bent his head to kiss her. He moved slowly, as if giving her a chance to refuse his invasion. She stilled, the urge to reject him overruled by a dark flame of desire. His lips slanted over hers in an undemanding kiss, tongue gently probing, lips caressing her mouth. She answered it, wanting to remember the taste of him, to recapture the essence of the mysterious man who had become so enormous in her memory. Releasing her wrists, he drew her closer and she slid her hands up the taut muscles of his arms, gripping them for stability.

He drew away too soon and she wobbled on her feet, panting, staring up

in a confused swirl of emotion. “I haven’t forgiven you.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t even know who you are,” she said hoarsely.

“That’s because I don’t exist.”

* * *

Ankles and wrists bound together, lying naked on her side, Rebecca Cavanah was the hottest thing he’d seen in a long time. She was his mark, which meant mixing business with pleasure was a no-brainer. As far as he was concerned, he was going above and beyond the call of duty, watching the leggy bombshell 24/7 for the

wedding weekend.

She was perfect—long legs, firm tits, a dimpled smile. She had the girl-next-door sweet beauty, which made her interest in whips and chains all the more intriguing. “I should tell you I have extensive training in torture techniques,” he told her, watching her wriggle. “Oh yeah, aren’t I supposed to give you a safe word or something?”

“French fry!” she blurted, as if she’d been waiting for him to ask.

He hid a smile. “French fry it is,” he said, picking up her flip-flop and smacking it against his palm as she squirmed in anticipation.

Two hours later, her bottom was a deep purplish red and he’d brought her

to orgasm four times. She lay limp, her eyes closed, making a soft humming sound in her throat. He untied the rope around her wrists and kissed the red marks it had left. “So, what’s your fantasy—master and slave? Sir and slut?”

She rolled on her back, her breasts spilling apart. “Not exactly.”

He straddled her and took her nipple between his thumb and forefinger and pinched, causing the relaxed tissue to instantly harden again. She rolled her head back and forth. “No more...I can’t come again, Zac.”

He pinched harder. “I decide

whether you can come or not.”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered.

“Ah, so it’s a ‘sir’ you want?”

She bit her lip and blushed.

“Actually, I’m more into bad girl spanked by big daddy or naughty young wife taken over her husband’s knee.”

It was only his months of government training to extinguish all physiological signs of reaction that kept him from gaping at that news. “So you do, actually, want a husband?” he teased.

She giggled. “Only if he spansks.”

He slid off her and nestled down next to her, pulling her into the curve of his shoulder.

“—for real. I would want a

husband who spans for real. Like if I was bitchy or didn't clean the bathroom. Or to end a stupid argument."

This time he chuckled.

She slapped his arm. "Don't laugh at me!"

"I'm sorry. It's just...that's adorable! What man wouldn't want a wife he could spank to end an argument?"

She made a raspberry sound with her lips. "Twenty-five years and you're the first one to ever lay a hand on my ass."

He grinned at her. "Well, we'll have to make up for lost time, then

won't we?"

* * *

Zac's phone buzzed, an unfortunate interruption. "That's our food," he said, reluctantly releasing Becca from his embrace to answer the call.

"Yeah," he spoke into the mouthpiece.

"I'm outside."

He took the fake nanny's laptop and cell phone and stepped outside, shutting the door behind him. He didn't want Becca and Parker to see Marcus, the San Diego desk agent who had shown up with a pizza and groceries and stayed for a brief exchange of intel.

“Here’s your laptop, and your travel bag.”

“Thanks. What do you know?”

He shook his head. “Probably the same thing you do—she was the professional known as Angel. No info on who might have hired her or why. If the target was El Demo, it seems strange she’d be watching his daughter—you’ve been watching her for seven years without a lead.”

“Let me know what you get from the laptop or phone.”

“I will. Beatty wants you to report. He’s sending over some agents to watch the civilians.”

“Negative. I’m not leaving them

until I know who ordered the hit and why.”

Marcus shrugged. “How are you going to explain that to Beatty? If he finds out you’ve got something personal here, you’ll be out of the country on the next plane.”

He stared over Marcus’s shoulder at the trees, silhouetted in the darkening sky. He had earned his reputation as “the ghost” by being fluid—following his gut, moving with the current to avoid capture, survive torture, or disappear like the wind. But where Becca and Parker were concerned, a mulish resistance clouded his judgment. He’d rushed in too quickly that evening, killing the one person with the answers.

Now he was going to sabotage himself again by showing his hand to Beatty. But he just couldn't trust them with anyone else. And now that he'd made contact with them, now that they knew he existed...walking away from them was going to kill him.

He refocused on Marcus, who knew his secret because he'd pulled the favor from him of faking his death and setting them up on a pension. Marcus had access to most government databases, and could create identities for people or make them disappear at the drop of a hat.

"I don't know," he said, exhaling. "Let me know as soon as you have anything."

Inside, Becca had turned skittish again. “So you still haven’t told me what’s going on,” she said as he unpacked the food.

He glanced pointedly at Parker and quirked an eyebrow. Parker caught the look. “She wasn’t really a nanny, was she?” he asked.

The hairs on Zac’s arms stood up. “No, buddy, she wasn’t.”

The boy gazed up at him with his mother’s eyes—round and green, with a smattering of freckles across his nose. The rest of his face looked like his own—the same the bone structure and shape of the mouth. His heart tightened. There was an undeniable biological response

to looking at the face of your own child. The urge to protect him was equal or even stronger than the need he had to keep Becca safe. It was that urge that had sent him flying into their apartment the moment he'd reviewed the security videos and identified the nanny as a hit woman.

“Who was she?”

“Bad guy.”

Parker nodded wisely, stuffing pizza in his mouth. “Thought so,” he said.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Becca said automatically. She turned a narrowed eye on him. “But *why* would I have a bad guy for a nanny?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out.”

Becca sank into a chair, looking like she wanted to puke. She rested her head in her hands. After a long silence, she lifted her head and asked, “When can we go back to our apartment?”

“Not for a few days, and only if we know it’s safe.”

“May I go to work?”

“No.”

Becca’s face flushed and she stood up. “Look, do you have some kind of credentials I could see?”

He considered her. He had a whole stack of ID tags with credentials—FBI, CIA, local police badges, Navy, Marine, and Coast Guard IDs. He had an ID for any situation in which he might find

himself. He didn't want to show her a lie, though. She and Parker were the only people in his life who were real. And he wasn't in their lives—he couldn't be in their lives, but for this tiny sliver of time he was with them, he wanted to be real. He shook his head. “No, because I don't exist.”

“Right, and the organization you're with probably doesn't exist either?”

He grinned. “You catch on fast.”

She blew her breath out with exasperation, sending the wispy hairs around her face flying. “We're not staying,” she said.

Oddly, he was turned on by her defiance, the plucky lift of her chin, a slight pouting of the already full lips.

Was it because he imagined disciplining her for it? The memory of their play as dominant and submissive rose afresh. He chose to ignore her defiance, though, rather than trigger the “we’re prisoners” discussion again. Redirecting the conversation, he asked, “Do you have any homework, Parker?”

“Nope.”

“Do you think she was there because of this family member I have?” Becca asked, reverting to their previous discussion.

He frowned and nodded. “Yeah, but I don’t know how yet. That’s what I have to find out.”

Parker finished wolfing down his

food and now sat looking sleepy. “May I please be excused from the table?”

“Eat two more carrots,” Becca said, shoving the bag of baby carrots at him.

“What time is your bedtime?”

“Eight o’clock.”

Zac made a show of looking at his watch. “It’s just about bedtime—did you bring a book to read?”

“Yep. I brought *Ricky Ricotta’s Mighty Robot*.”

“Ooh, that sounds good. Do you read that or does your mom read it to you?”

He shrugged. “I can read it, but she reads faster.”

“May I read it to you tonight?”

“Sure,” he said, sliding off his chair and trotting to his backpack. “Which room is mine?”

Zac’s eyes slid to Becca. He knew which bed he’d like her in, but that was probably not going to happen. “Let your mom decide.”

There were two bedrooms—a master bedroom with a king bed and a master bath, and a second bedroom with two beds.

“We’re sleeping in there,” Becca said immediately, pointing to the second bedroom.

* * *

“How was that?”

She made a soft humming noise.

“You could have taken more, couldn’t you?”

She lay on her belly, her ass throbbing from the spanking he’d just administered, her pussy throbbing from the pounding it had taken afterward, her limbs limp with satiated passion. She blushed and nodded. “Do you think...maybe you could use your belt next time?”

His eyebrows shot up, grin widening. “Now?”

She ducked her head, hiding her face in the bedspread and chickening out. “No, I mean, maybe later.”

He stood up, fully comfortable in

his nudity, his chest and arms bronzed a golden tan from the sun. He was all lean muscle and moved with the agility of an athlete. He pulled his belt out of the loops of his discarded pants and wound the buckle end around his fist. A thrill of cold fear shot through her, but she remained as she lay, her bottom exposed to him. This is was their last night together—when else would she have the chance to play with a willing participant?

Chapter Two

Hearing Zac talk to Parker the way a father talks to a son was like a knife through her heart. She hated him for it—hated him for doing it so well; hated him for not doing it for the first six years of Parker's life; hated him for making her long to have a man like him in their lives.

Her thoughts were so tangled, she couldn't possibly begin to make sense of them. The looming question ought to be whether they were they safe with the man who had just murdered someone in their apartment, but instead her mind swirled around her bitterness at his

abandonment, and a gnawing ache to feel his arms around her again.

He watched her now, with a steady, absorbing regard that sent a tingle right down to her toes. It was that sort of attention that had made her two nights with him incomparable to any other coupling. He had read her so well, delivered her every desire, sensed her limits. And if she had ruined one-night stands for him, he certainly had ruined all other men for her.

“I’m ready!” Parker called out, standing in the doorway in his Spiderman PJs.

“Did you brush your teeth?” she asked.

“Yep.”

Zac stood up. “Okay, let’s see this robot book of yours.” He followed Parker into the room and they curled up on one of the beds together.

“How about if I read one page and then you read one page?” she heard Zac ask.

“Okay!” Again, the innocent eagerness. No judgment or anger from Parker. No *where have you been?* or *where do you get off waltzing into my life and playing daddy?* But then, Parker had recognized Zac—had called him a spy guy. With a fresh rush of sick, she wondered if he’d made contact with Parker without her knowing. She stood up and cleared the table of the remains

of their dinner. She'd only been able to eat a few carrots, herself. Keeping one ear on Zac and Parker, her thoughts rounded again on her immediate dilemma. Whether Zac was for real or not, she needed to get to her phone and notify someone of her whereabouts—her sister, maybe—so she could call the authorities if she and Parker never resurfaced. Of course, if Becca didn't call into work in the morning and Parker never showed up at school, it might trigger some sort of investigation anyway, which could be an excuse to get her sim card and battery back from Zac.

She finished her obsessive scrubbing of already clean counters in the kitchen and, hearing nothing but quiet

from the bedroom, went to look. They were snuggled together on the bed—Parker asleep in the nook of Zac’s arm. In the second before Zac had looked up, she thought she’d seen him gazing at Parker with something akin to longing. Seeing her, he carefully extricated himself from the sleep-heavy limbs of their son and stood, his lean, muscular body unfolding with a panther-like grace.

She waited until he’d shut the door before she demanded, “Have you made contact with Parker before?”

He shook his head.

“How did he know you?”

Zac rubbed a hand over his close-

cropped sandy hair and flopped into an overstuffed chair. She perched on the edge of the loveseat facing him. “I don’t know. I have a sixth sense—an ability to know things without being told. I’m guessing he inherited it.”

She’d considered this before. Parker had an uncanny habit of knowing her thoughts, or saying truly bizarre things about people.

“I think maybe we have a connection. There have been times when I’m in extreme discomfort, I have out-of-body experiences. A few times I’ve ended up with Parker.”

She took a breath. “What you mean, *ended up* with him?”

He shrugged. “I mean, suddenly,

I'm in his room, or at his school. I can see him, but he doesn't see me. It's like I'm dead already—a ghost.”

Every hair follicle on Becca's body lifted. She rubbed her arms, trying to remember the things Parker had claimed about his father.

My dad bought this car for us, but my mom thinks she won it in a drawing.

“Did you buy my car?”

His eyebrows flickered. “Did Parker know that?”

“Did you?” she demanded, angry at the rearranging of her reality.

He nodded.

“What else?”

He shrugged.

“What else?” her voice cracked.
“How else have you interfered in my life?”

He looked wary.

“Tell me! Have you been in my apartment before?”

He looked at her, then nodded once. She remembered another one of Parker’s claims. “Do you own the building?”

He tilted his head to one side. “I arranged for its purchase.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t exist, remember? So I don’t own anything, either.”

She stood up and began to pace. “But you’re the reason we live in a three-bedroom, but pay the rent of a

studio?”

He shrugged, rising from the armchair and approaching her. “I couldn’t support you directly, other than arranging for the pension. But now that you know about me, it will be easier. I’ll find ways to funnel you money. I’ll take care of you.”

“How?” she demanded, turning her shoulder on him to reject his advances. “By spying on us and murdering our nannies?”

He wrapped his arms around her from behind. She felt his breath hot on her ear. “I’m sorry, Becca,” he murmured. She made an attempt to free herself from his embrace, but he pressed his chest against her back, containing her

with gentle strength. “You deserved a real father for your baby. You deserve a real man in your life.” He swayed, rocking her in standing. “I can’t give you that. A ghost can’t give much. But I will protect you. I’ll make sure you’re safe to live your lives without me.”

Tears spilled onto her cheeks. He had just answered her most underlying question—the one she hadn’t even dared to allow to surface. Assuming he wasn’t a psycho stalker, and she was able to get beyond her anger and resentment for his abandonment, surveillance, and meddling, assuming they got out of whatever danger they were in—there was still no hope Zac would stay in their

lives. She elbowed him off her. “I need some time alone, okay?” she choked.

He released her slowly, as if reluctant to let her go. “Yeah, okay. I’m going to take a quick shower. Don’t unlock the door, don’t go near the windows. If you see or hear anything, call to me.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

He picked up his bag and headed to the master bedroom.

Wiping her tears, she did another round in the kitchen before she remembered her objective to get her phone operational. She grabbed the useless phone out of her purse and peeked into the bedroom. The door to the master bath was standing ajar,

presumably so he could hear her if she called out. Slipping into the steaming bathroom and crouching on the floor, she searched his shed clothing for the confiscated battery and sim card. She paused at the Kevlar vest, noticing there were two bullets mashed in, just over his heart. Hers gave a lurch at the thought that he would have died that afternoon without the vest. Underneath it lay his black pants, and she found the phone parts in the back pocket where he'd placed them. Palming them, she crept back out and stood in the bedroom to pop the back off her phone.

The large hand that closed over her fist made her shriek. An arm wrapped

around her waist and yanked her backward, against a wet body. “Zac!” she gasped, her lungs closing.

“What did I tell you would happen if you disobeyed me?” he growled.

* * *

It was a dangerous line to tread, considering he was on thin ice with her, but Zac had seen the way Becca’s pupils dilated and her nipples pointed when he’d threatened to spank her earlier. He knew from monitoring her computer she still spent her free time downloading spanking romances to her Kindle, cruising domestic discipline blogs, and watching punishment videos. Spanking

was her kink and the idea of fulfilling her fantasies turned him on.

But she was scared—possibly too scared. He'd triggered another asthma attack by surprising her and she was trembling in his hold. The shower was still running—he'd wrapped a towel around his waist when he got out, but left the water on to mask the sound of his approach. He tugged her with him as he walked backward into the bathroom and shut the door behind them.

She tried to twist in his grasp, nervous about his intent. "Shh," he said in her ear, leaning against the door and pulling her to lean against him. "You're just going to breathe in the steam until your lungs have opened."

He felt a slight relaxation in her muscles as she gave him more weight, leaning back against his chest and spreading her ribs in the front. He pried her fingers open to retrieve the phone battery and sim card, which he tossed back on top of his clothing.

Her breath was starting to calm. He rubbed her arms and held her against his body so she felt his strength. When her breath slowed to a normal pace, he pulled her in the direction of the toilet, where he put one foot up on it and folded her across his knee, tossing her skirt up.

“No!” she cried. “Stop it!”

He peeled her panties down.

“You can’t—”

His hand connected with her ass, making a resounding slap.

“Stop! Parker will hear!”

He brought his hand down again in the same spot. “Not with the shower on,” he said. “You deliberately disobeyed and now you’re going to be punished.” He brought his hand down with his full strength and she jerked and pinched her butt cheeks together.

“No!”

She wriggled so he had to hold her torso firmly as he started spanking her bare bottom fast and hard. Her skin turned from creamy white to blush to sunburn red. He had read the books she downloaded, followed the blogs she

liked. He knew part of the turn-on was being forced to submit. But knowing what turns someone on doesn't mean they want it from you. Becca continued to struggle, seeming to become angrier. It had been a fine line and it was possible he'd crossed it. He debated whether to stop or go on.

“French fry!” she yelled.

He stilled.

Her safe word.

Disappointed she'd rejected him, angry with himself for messing up, he pulled up her panties and flipped down her skirt, releasing her. He turned off the shower, opened the door to the bedroom and stepped out, dropping the towel to pull on clean clothes from the bag

Marcus had brought. He listened to the sound of her ragged breath, keeping his ear trained to be sure she didn't pick up the cell phone parts again.

She stood in the doorway, watching him dress, but he couldn't bring himself to look at her.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

He didn't answer.

"I just—I don't know." She wrapped her arms around herself, huddled up. "I'm sorry, Zac. I'm still really pissed at you. And I just got scared for a minute. Or overwhelmed or something."

He didn't answer. He wasn't sure what to say. She didn't owe him an

apology—he owed her one, but words were eluding him.

“You can spank me now,” she said in a small voice.

He pulled a shirt over his head, assimilating her 180 without a visible reaction. “Is that how it works?” he asked, meeting her eye coolly, remaining in the role of dominant. “Do you decide when and how you get spanked?”

She blinked at him. “No, sir.”

He gave no outward reaction to her use of the word “sir” but it ignited a stampede of triumph within him. He was forgiven.

“No,” he concurred, showing nothing, sitting on the bed to pull on his socks.

The sound of a sniffle made him realize with alarm she was crying. He stood and closed the distance between them, wrapping his arms around her. “Shh, Becca,” he whispered. “It’s all right.”

“I’m sorry,” she choked.

“Don’t apologize.” He stroked her hair. “You can trust me, Becca. I promise. I’m on your side.”

She leaned her full weight against him and he relished the offering. “Are you still going to spank me?” she quavered.

“Yes,” he answered firmly. “Are you ready?”

She nodded into his chest.

“Take off your clothes and stand in the corner.”

She pulled away and looked up at him, her lips parted in surprise. He gave her a challenging look and watched her turn resolute. She pulled off her t-shirt and skirt and walked to the corner in her bra and underwear. There, facing the wall, she slowly removed them, too. Her breath was short and labored. He went to the bathroom to pick up the phone parts and stow them on the ledge above the door frame. He strapped on his Glock 27, never forgetting his real reason for being there.

Removing the plastic rod from the drapes, he tossed it on the bed before

retrieving her inhaler. Reaching around behind her, he pressed it to her mouth and delivered a dose. When her breath had slowed, he asked, “Are you scared of me, Becca?” He held her shoulders, his lips close to her ear.

“I-I don’t know,” she answered. “No, I don’t think so. I’m scared—but not about—not about this.”

He kissed her ear. “Good. Go and bend over the side of the bed.”

She sucked in her breath and obeyed him, her chin lowered, her forearms covering her breasts as she walked. She bent over and presented her delicious posterior for punishment. Confident this time, he ran his hand over her still-pink flesh, feeling the baby-

softness of her skin, the shape of her muscular curves.

“I’m going to spank you long and hard, Becca,” he said. “And I’m going to spank you to tears, so don’t hold back on me. There’s no safe-wording out of it this time—the spanking will be over when I decide it’s over, and only when I decide. I will make sure you’ve learned your lesson.” Then he added a little neuro-linguistic programming, “Your lungs will stay open and you will be able to breathe normally.”

She lifted her head, craning it around to try to see his face. He gave her butt a slap. “Yes, Becca. Your lungs can obey me, too. Just believe it, and it will

be true.”

He started to spank with his hand again, and this time she held still for him, making little cries and jumping, but not fighting him. She curled her fingers into the bedspread and hid her face. He spanked steadily for a long time, giving her a thorough warm-up to prevent bruising. He liked the way she twisted and dodged, kicked up her legs in a natural response to the pain, despite the fact it was something she simultaneously craved. He stopped and rubbed her bottom, murmuring, “Good girl, Becca. You’re doing well.”

She whimpered in response and he picked up the rod that pulled the curtains. “Now I’m going to whip you.”

The plastic rod made an effective implement—thin enough to impart a real sting, hard enough to create a deeper pain. He brought it down smartly across both cheeks. She gasped and whimpered. He tapped her bottom with it. “There was a known assassin in your apartment today,” he told her and brought the rod down again. She lurched forward, pressing her hips against the bed, as if she might escape the punishment. “We don’t know who she was working for or why she was there.” He brought the rod down twice in rapid succession. “If you make a call on your cell phone, anyone with a tracking device can trace your exact location.” He whipped the plastic

rod across her buttocks again. Red weals stood out from each stroke he'd delivered. He hoped she would cry soon, because he didn't want to spank her hard enough to break her skin. He gave her three in a row, quickly, and she let out a long squeal. "So if I tell you it's not safe to make a phone call, should you use your phone?"

"No, sir!" she gasped.

He applied another three fast strokes.

"Good girl," he said.

* * *

Becca was close to tears. The stinging pain was overriding all her

senses, generating a rushing sound that made Zac's words sound far away.

“You're risking Parker's life when you disobey my orders. That is unacceptable.”

“Yes, sir!”

The tears were almost there, just beneath the surface—a throbbing in her face and throat. She wanted them out—needed them out. And they were what would end the horrible spanking. As if he knew just exactly what she needed, Zac began to whip her repeatedly, bringing the dreadful rod down again and again, not allowing her time to catch her breath. She felt the sob rising in her throat as the inescapable pain of his continued assault exploded all around

her. It came out, first one sob, then another, then a long, shaking string of them. Zac dropped the rod and spanked with his hand, still at a steady rhythm, as if he could not let her off the hook until he'd wrung every last sob out of her. She wept into the bedspread, the pain receding to background noise, a quiet space of peace bubbling her in as the high from endorphins made her invincible.

She realized Zac had stopped spanking and was rubbing her flaming bottom. "That's it, baby," he crooned softly. "You did so well...good girl."

Contentment hummed through her. She felt a blanket draped over her and

then Zac scooped her in his arms, carrying her to the head of the bed, where he leaned against the headboard and nestled her between his legs. She lay her head back on his chest, enjoying the pleasure of his fingers trailing up and down her arms, weaving through her hair.

With her body relaxed, her mind was able to pick through the chaotic events of the day. Zac's appearance from the dead would have been shocking enough, let alone learning he was some kind of modern-day warrior bent on protecting her from an unknown threat. Her mind flitted to the tender way he'd put Parker to sleep, and then to her spanking. He'd been a dream spanker—

said and done all the perfect things. That thought jarred her. She twisted in his arms to look at him, frowning. He studied her with his intelligent eyes; she could almost feel his mind trying to guess her thoughts.

“Who do you spank?” she demanded.

He leaned his face closer to hers. “What?”

“Who else? Who do you spank?”

The corners of his mouth lifted. “No one but you, sweetheart.”

She slapped his chest. “This isn’t funny.”

He looked amused, but he caught her wrist. “Ok, no more hitting tonight or

you go back over my knee.”

She ignored the spasm between her legs those words produced, and glared. He leaned to the side so she didn't have to crane her neck so far to see him. “Becca, I have never spanked anyone but you. You were my first and you're my only.”

“Bullshit.”

“It's the God's honest truth. I'm a ghost, remember? I don't have relationships. If you think I've improved since last time, it's because I've had seven years to research how it's done.”

“You've researched it?”

She saw something in his face close, as if he were emotionally retreating before her eyes. He shrugged.

“Why?”

He looked away.

“For me?” she demanded. “Did you plan to come back to me?”

His jaw set and he looked at her without answering.

“Answer me, Zac! I need some answers from you!”

He blinked. “I don’t know,” he said in a low voice. “I didn’t plan to return, but I guess I fantasized about it. Even though I’m not in your life, you are in mine. You and Parker are the only family I’ve ever had.”

“No family growing up?” she asked softly, praying he wouldn’t clam up again.

He shook his head. “Foster home kid. I was an ideal candidate for Black Ops. No one even noticed when they erased my identity. And now the DNA in that kid,” he said, pointing toward the room where Parker slept, “and this body I live in,” he said, flapping a hand toward his legs, “are the only things in this world that prove I actually exist.”

For a moment, she glimpsed the hollowness that must be his non-existence. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to lean back against his chest again. “So, no, I didn’t plan on seeing you again, because a relationship with me would be a death sentence. But getting to hold you one last time is a

privilege I'm not going to walk away from."

The rational part of her brain told her not to listen, not to believe a word he said. But her heart fluttered like a bird with a broken wing—unable to take off, but unwilling to give up, either. The words *I love you* came into her mind, unbidden, and she shoved them away. There was no love here. There might be attraction, but love was for people who knew each other, who took care of each other, who stuck around.

"Thank you for taking your spanking like a good girl," he whispered in her ear, his hand reaching around to tug at one nipple.

Her thoughts toppled out of her

mind.

His other hand slid down her belly, over her trimmed mound, fingers curling into the dripping heat of her pussy. She pressed back at him, the tenderness of her butt cheeks enhancing the sensation of his stroking. He squeezed and pinched her nipple harder while his fingers continued to circle in her juices and his mouth found her neck with a hot open-mouthed kiss.

She moaned and covered the hand between her legs with hers, urging his fingers deeper. She felt his cock pressing through his pants at her low back. Part of her wanted to deny him—to shield herself from further heartache and

to punish him. But the aching pulse of her clit overruled her mind.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her up to sit on his lap so his fingers could reach further inside her. One of his hands cupped and kneaded her smarting bottom as the other hand worked her wanton pussy, rocketing her into a delirium of mixed pain and pleasure. She leaned back, throwing off the blanket, arching over his shoulder, the pebbled tips of her nipples aiming toward the ceiling as she opened her mouth for the low moans that erupted from her. She squirmed and wriggled, the simultaneous urge to escape and burrow in deeper driving her into a frenzy as Zac's fingers plunged in

and out of her. He found her g-spot and the sensation brought on a surge of panic, followed by squirting fluid and a thundering orgasm, which Zac wrestled out of her as she writhed under his hands.

When it was over, she nearly wept for the second time that night, though she couldn't have said why. She lay collapsed on Zac, so limp she could scarcely move. He stroked both hands up her sides to cup her breasts, then circled his open palms over her erect nipples.

* * *

He inhaled the smell of Becca—the light citrus smell of her hair, the sweet

musk of her juices. He had a raging hard-on, but no expectations of relieving it. He owed Becca her pleasure—she owed him nothing but a swift kick in the ass. He didn't mind the prospect of being left blue-balled. There was satisfaction enough in indulging her desires—it fulfilled some primal need in him.

* * *

“I like spanking you,” he told her as she slid to her knees before him, taking hold of his cock and looking up at him with big, shining eyes. He cupped her face and realized with a ripple of shock that her cheeks were

wet. He had produced tears with his belt. He hadn't meant to—the way she'd lifted her hips to meet the kiss of leather had led him to believe she craved more and so he'd continued until she'd gone limp.

Shyly, she took him into her mouth, opening her jaw to fully envelop his cock, still gazing at him as if he were a Greek God. The way she laid herself bare to him—not her body, but her soul—her vulnerability, her trust in him, a perfect stranger—was so far removed from anything he'd experienced in his life that he found himself powerfully bound to her, as if she were weaving some spell that would leave him forever changed.

“I like you on your knees,” he murmured, guiding her head forward and back. “I like you over my lap. I like you all tied up and ready for me.”

His words excited her and she moved over his length with enthusiasm, taking him into the back of her throat, though the depth caused tears to glitter in her green eyes.

* * *

Less than ten minutes later, her eyes closed and breath deepened. He lay for another half hour, enjoying the feel of her in his arms, then wrapped the blanket back around her and picked her up, carrying her to the second bed in the

room where Parker slept.

His phone buzzed and he picked it up. “Yep.”

Marcus’s voice was clipped and efficient as always. “Nothing on the laptop, but listen to this. Cell indicates a call from a Black Ops phone. It’s scrambled, so I don’t have an ID on the caller, but the scramble is one of ours.”

“*Shit*. Has Demo been sighted?”

“Not according to my intel, but maybe there’s some cover-up.”

“Why would there be a cover-up? There’s already a kill on sight order out for him—why keep it a secret?”

“I don’t know, but get this—Beatty’s on a flight to San Diego. Said he wanted to see all the intel in the

morning.”

The hairs stood up on Zac’s arms. *Why would Beatty care about this?* His mind spun around the facts—Becca’s father, dead to his family for over 15 years, was a former operative known as El Demo, short for demolition, named for his affinity with explosives. He disappeared several months before his daughter’s wedding under suspicion of espionage. A kill order was placed on him, but he never resurfaced. All operatives and all agencies had him as a top wanted, so the need to place a private-hire hit woman with Becca didn’t add up. Unless El Demo had an inside partner when he sold intel to

Afghani rebels and that partner now wanted to ensure his death before he was questioned. Remembering Marcus was still hanging on the line, he clipped, "Keep me posted if you find anything else."

"Yep."

"Is their apartment scrubbed?"

"Should be ready by morning."

"Thanks," he said and shut off his phone.

He rubbed a hand over his closely cropped hair and debated waking Becca and Parker to evacuate the premises. But the target was El Demo, not them. If a private hit was out on El Demo, the hit man would gain nothing by harming his bait.

He spent the night on the sofa, the need to properly guard his family unhindered by logic, which had already told him they were secure. By morning the idea of his time with Becca and Parker soon ending pressed in on his chest. Unused to emotions of any kind, the suffocation aroused his fight instinct, though for once, there was no one to fight, no danger to dodge.

He heard the sound of light feet and Parker rushed into the living room, taking a wild, happy stance. "Surprise!" he yelled gleefully.

He groaned and sat up, rubbing his stiff neck. "Good morning, champ."

"What's for breakfast?"

“Hmm, I’m beginning to think all you talk about is food,” he said, swinging his legs off the couch to stand and pad toward the kitchen.

“Bacon and eggs. Or cereal.”

“What kind of cereal?”

“Golden Grahams,” he said, holding up the cereal he knew was a favorite of Parker’s and only allowed on special occasions because his mother did not consider it nutritious enough. “All right!” he exclaimed.

“But you have to have a banana in it,” Zac ordered, imitating Becca’s usual admonishments.

“O-kay,” he said, drawing out the last syllable as if it were a great burden.

Zac poured the cereal and milk, cut the banana into it, and handed it to Parker. Then he pulled out a frying pan to fry up the bacon.

“Good morning,” Becca mumbled with a sleepy wave as she stumbled to the bathroom. His chest tightened even more. Just the thought of interacting with her pained him. When she re-emerged, her hair lay in wet ringlets over her shoulders, and she was wearing the clothes he’d grabbed for her when he’d packed her bag, a pretty peasant blouse and jeans. He drank in the sight of her—so much better in real life than on the video feed he’d been watching. There was a freshness, a blooming innocence

to her, yet everything about her was sexy. She was wholesome and hot at the same time. He wanted her—not just to have sex with her, but to devour her, to possess her, to own her. He wanted to wake up every morning to this visage.

And since that was impossible, he could only manage to grunt, “Bacon and eggs?”

“Sure, thanks,” she said, with a morning-after shyness about her that only amped up his guilt. He served them both and sat down, shoveling the food into his mouth to finish in less than three minutes. He sat back and gave his plate a surly stare. Parker finished and ran back to his bedroom, the sounds of his imaginary play floating back to them.

Becca looked up timidly. “I’m sorry I fell asleep.”

Oh, God. She thought he was disgruntled about *that*. He waved a hand dismissively. “I expected it.”

She cleared her throat. “Thank you —”

“Don’t,” he interrupted, holding his hand up to stop her. “You’re going back to your apartment today, as soon as I get word it’s clear. I want you to call in sick for both you and Parker, though.”

She nodded.

He handed her his phone after looking up the number of her school. “Call from this phone.” She reached for the phone, but he didn’t release it. “Look

at me.”

She met his eyes.

“Do not give any clues about where you are or who you are with. If I have to punish you again, it won’t be the fun kind and it won’t have a happy ending.” His voice had a meaner edge to it than he intended and she blanched, her eyes widening before they narrowed.

The dilation in her pupils this time had nothing to do with arousal and her hands shook slightly as she snatched the phone out of his hand with a murderous glare. “Fuck. You,” she hissed, but her voice wavered and her eye contact faltered. He could hear the telltale rasp of her breath in closing lungs. He admired the show of bravado when her

real fear was so obvious. He stood to retrieve her inhaler, listening to her wheezing voice as she told her work she wouldn't be in.

“Good girl,” he said when she hung up, handing her the inhaler, and taking the phone back to look up Parker's school.

Chapter Three

She wanted to stab out Zac Casper's ice cold eyes right now. Or whatever his real name was. Her sense of violation skyrocketed by the minute as the stranger handed over his phone with a menacing look. Her mind flashed to the efficient, brutal fight that took place in her apartment the day before, reminding her that all she really knew about this man was that he was a killer. She glowered at him, struggling to slow her breath while the phone rang. She left a message with Parker's school, then tossed the phone in the direction of his face. There was no surprise or fumbling;

his reflexes fired so quickly, she never saw his hand move before the fingers closed around the phone as easily as if they'd been playing ball. Remembering those same fingers had been inside her the night before made her sick.

A beep sounded at the front door swung noiselessly open; at the same moment Zac drew his gun and pointed it steadily at the man in a crisp dark suit. He ignored Zac and the gun, entering as if he owned the place. Parker must have sensed something, because he came trotting out of his room on cue.

“Go back to the bedroom and shut the door, Parker,” Zac ordered, his voice steely.

Parker froze, looking at the gun and

the newcomer with interest.

The man looked from Parker's face to Zac's, and she could feel him make the connection—the similarities were too obvious.

“Now, Parker.”

Trance broken, Parker obeyed, scurrying back to the room and shutting the door with a resounding click.

The intruder still ignored Zac's gun, simply crossed the room and pulled out a chair at the table next to her, sitting in it. Zac looked wary, but he put his gun away and joined them. “You have an unsanctioned relationship.”

“There's no relationship,” Zac said firmly.

He looked pointedly toward the bedroom where Parker had disappeared. “Unreported offspring.”

“But no relationship.”

The man tented his fingers and looked at Zac. “I flew out here myself to find out why my best agent acted out of character. Now it makes sense.”

Zac didn’t answer, but a muscle in his jaw twitched. The man’s focus turned deliberately to Becca, causing her heart rate to increase. “She knows nothing,” Zac said immediately.

She shook her inhaler and took another puff to stave off the collapsing feeling in her lungs.

The steepled fingers interlaced to

rest on the table. “Report.”

“There’s been no contact since the initial assignment. Surveillance identified the presence of an independent hit man and I went in to ensure the safety of the civilians.”

“Did logic tell you the civilians’ safety was at risk?”

Zac’s lips pressed together.

“There’s a reason there’s a code against field agents having relationships.”

“Did you place the operative?”

The man raised his eyebrows, then frowned. “Why would I engage outside the organization?”

“You tell me.”

His eyes narrowed. “Evidence?”

“A call from the inside to her phone.”

The man sat silently for several beats, then shook his head. “She may have a contact on the inside, but she was working for herself. He reached in a briefcase and pulled out a manila folder, sliding a photo of a man with a gunshot wound in the middle of his forehead to Zac. “Her partner. Said to have been killed by El Demo. It looks like revenge.”

Zac examined the photo then passed it back, noncommittally.

“This case is closed. I need you on a plane by noon for a critical mission. I will debrief and reinstate the civilians.”

Zac stared at the man, who was clearly his superior, for a long time, then he gave a single nod and pushed back from the table.

“I don’t need to tell you—”

“You don’t need to tell me anything,” Zac interrupted, stalking toward the bedroom without a backward glance.

The man’s gaze swiveled to her. “Will you get your things together, ma’am?”

A cold prickle ran up her arms. She stood, trying to look as calm as possible. She met Zac in the hall, his face still stony, but his eyes searching hers like he wanted to tell her something. He raised

them to look over her shoulder at his boss, and swallowed. “Stay safe,” he said softly and she recognized him again—the Zac from last night. “You won’t hear from me, but I’ll be watching.” He looked over his own shoulder at the door to the room where Parker was.

Her eyes filled with tears. “You tell him goodbye,” she hissed.

He hesitated a moment more, but then nodded and turned back, entering the room and crouching next to Parker, who was playing with a plastic dragon on the floor. She followed, but ignored them to give them privacy, picking up their things and stuffing them into the bags.

“Buddy, I’ve gotta go. It’s not safe

for me to be around you—too many bad guys might want to hurt you to get to me.”

“No,” Parker whined.

“I’m sorry, kiddo.”

“When will I see you?”

“You won’t,” Zac said, his words sounding strangled. “I can’t be your dad, buddy, I’m just a ghost.”

“Will you still haunt me?”

Becca’s hairs stood on end.

“Yeah, buddy. I will always haunt you. Okay?” Zac cradled his head and kissed his forehead. “Be good. Listen to your mom. I’ll be watching.” He ruffled Parker’s hair and stood up, giving her one last shipwrecked look before

leaving.

“Put your shoes on, Parker, we’re leaving too,” she said, trying to keep her voice normal.

“But not with my dad?”

“Right, not with your dad.”

“With that man?”

“Yeah,” she said, her belly tightening. She had that “out of the pot and into the fire” sort of feeling about going anywhere with him, but it seemed there was no choice and she didn’t think Zac would leave them with him if he didn’t believe they were safe. She followed him to a black Bronco parked out front and climbed in the back with Parker for a silent ride back to their apartment in Golden Hill. The man

dropped them in the parking garage near the elevators, with a terse, “Here you are.”

“All right,” she mumbled. “Come on, Parker,” she said, speaking to her child to avoid having to speak to him. “Thank you,” she said, slamming the door shut and scanning the garage for Zac’s SUV, on the very off-chance he did, in fact, live in their building, as Parker had claimed. She didn’t see it.

Inside, her apartment felt so strange—as if she were a completely different person from the one who’d left it less than twenty-four hours earlier. She glanced around, looking for signs people had been in it. The broken window had

been replaced and the mess of the struggle had been cleaned up, but otherwise there was no evidence showing how many had been in there, or what they had done. She looked around at the ceilings. There were cameras there, somewhere. She shivered.

* * *

“So this is it?” she asked, standing outside the hotel as Zac loaded her suitcase into the trunk of her car, which he had pulled around to the front like her own personal valet. She handed him the garment bag with her crumpled bridesmaid dress and he tossed it on top of the suitcase and

closed the trunk.

He turned to her, pulling her against him. "Thank you for a great weekend."

"Thank you. Good luck in Iraq. Should I email you, just in case you have access?"

He hesitated just long enough for her gut to clench with the realization that the "no access" claim might have been a line. "I'd like that," he said and slanted his lips over hers for a Hollywood-worthy goodbye kiss.

She got in the car and left him at the curb, trying to ignore the sudden emptiness within.

Pacing around the apartment, she tried to disentangle her thoughts, but each thread only ended in new questions. Who was this family member they called El Demo? Was there really a Black Ops branch of the NSA or CIA or whatever he had said? Was any part of Zac's story true? Was any part of *Zac* true? He'd hurt and frightened her that morning when he'd threatened her, but the way he'd handled her the night before had been fantasy fulfillment material. And the haunting in his eyes when he talked about them seemed real. Still, he was nothing more than a glorified stalker—a man who looked into their lives like a peeping Tom, who had made them into

something significant to fill the emptiness of his own pale existence. *A ghost.*

She spent a long, miserable day cooped up in the apartment with Parker, and was relieved to call it bedtime at 9 pm. Just as she plugged her cell phone into the charger, it buzzed with a text message.

*I'm sorry. I will always love you.
Do not reply.*

Do not reply. *Damn him!* Hot tears burned her eyes. She hadn't gone there. She'd made it through the entire day without pretending anything they'd had had been real. And now he'd sent her a

stupid text saying he loved her. A sob escaped her lips. *No. You cannot love a man you do not know. You cannot love a man you do not trust, who is not even a real man. You cannot love a man you can never see again.*

Wiping her tears, she sniffed and quoted the Bard out loud, *“Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more, Men were deceivers ever, One foot in sea and one on shore, To one thing constant never.”*

* * *

“Anything to drink, sir?” the flight attendant asked, smiling and moving along when he shook his head. First class to Paris under the alias Zack

Moore, a business development manager for a tech company, he read all the background material for his mission. He was headed to Helsinki to investigate the disappearance of a key alternative power scientist. The chat box launched on his screen with a message from Beatty.

Stinger: Civilians deposited safely. You're off their surveillance, permanently.

He popped his cursor in his chat box.

Ghost: Negative. Sir.

As if adding the “sir” would soften his insubordination. Beatty would probably read it as sarcastic, anyway.

Stinger: You are already skating

on thin ice with me.

Ghost: They are my responsibility. Taking me off detail will not stop my watch. Don't force me underground.

He could almost feel Beatty's beady stare as his boss considered the complexities of the situation. He was 60% sure Beatty would throw him a pass on this. Zac was a top performer, with clean, successful missions. He had overthrown regimes, rescued hostages, eliminated undesirables, and transported the most sensitive data. He knew enough of his country's secrets to make him extremely dangerous if his loyalties were ever bought or swayed. If Beatty forced him to break with the

organization, Zac would go on their hit list. Agents in his position generally only left the organization as an unnamed body in a box.

Stinger: I want your mind on your mission.

He'd conceded. He didn't think Beatty would be ready to cut him loose over this.

Ghost: It will be, sir.

The chat screen disappeared and Zac sat back, exhaling a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

He hit an icon and the security cams in Becca's apartment came up. She and Parker were both where they should be—Parker sleeping in his bed, Becca sitting on hers with her laptop. He

relaxed at the sight of them, though he'd been 99% sure Beatty wouldn't harm them, he never trusted anyone completely. He hit a different icon to see what Becca was reading. Domestic discipline blogs, her nightly routine. She only lurked, never commented, so he couldn't tell what she really thought about them. Did she want a domestic discipline relationship? Or was she just turned on because they described spankings? This was the missing piece of the puzzle he'd made out of analyzing Becca's life. He knew his obsessive surveillance of her bordered on unhealthy, not to mention immoral, although working for Black Ops had

taught him moral flexibility. Still, she and Parker were an anchor to him, helping him remember what it is to be human.

He opened his browser and pulled up the banking information from one of his off-shore accounts. Punching in the numbers, he set up a series of transfers to cloak a trail to Becca's account and hit "complete action."

One hundred thousand dollars should take care of any financial strain. There was a solid comfort in having the ability to support her now that she knew he existed. It had been tricky before, although he'd enjoyed the game of it—leaving twenties on the floor of the elevator for Parker to discover, and

arranging for them to occupy the best apartment in the building for only \$750 a month.

But he enjoyed Becca knowing the support came from him even more, though it was wrong to add kindling to the flame that never should have been reignited in the first place. But it had. To put a cherry on it, he ordered a bike to be delivered to Parker. His chest tightened thinking about the boy—his son, though he never allowed himself to think of him that way. But, God, their connection was undeniable. *The kid had heard the music he played in his head.*

He closed the browser and stared at the security images again. Becca's

hand was between her legs and her eyes were closed, her legs jerking. His cock went rock hard, the pent-up frustration from their interaction the night before rocketing his desire. He rubbed his face, holding his breath, waiting for her orgasm as if it were his own.

* * *

Becca took a breath and knocked on the superintendent's door. She heard his classic rock station blaring inside and the door swung.

“Hey, Nick.”

“Hi, Becca. I know, I know, you told me about that leak a week ago. I’ll be up tomorrow to fix it—”

“No, no,” she cut in. “I mean, tomorrow’s fine. But what I was wondering if you could tell me which apartment the owner lives in?”

Nick’s lip curled. “The owner? He don’t live here. Not that I know of, anyway. What makes you think he does?”

“Oh, I thought maybe he had the place upstairs? Is it a penthouse?”

“Penthouse? Are you nuts? There’s no penthouse here. Upstairs is more apartments just like yours. And no owner lives in them. The owner’s an out-of-state guy—that’s why the management company runs everything.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, why are you asking?” he peered at her.

“Oh, I, uh, just wanted to meet him, that’s all. You know, to tell him how much I like the place. Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow then?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there some time in the morning.”

“Thanks, Nick.”

Becca got back in the elevator and sighed. It had been worth a try. She’d already tried calling the management company, without any luck. Discovering a mysterious deposit of one hundred grand in her bank account that morning had galvanized her into action. As angry as she was at Zac for lying to her and

spying like a peeping Tom, there was something appealing about his secret attention, knowing he'd been looking out for them all these years. And now he'd followed through on his promise of financial support.

Her brain had been in a blender all week, and now she'd decided she needed to find Zac. Meeting him all those years ago had been a game-changer, and that was before she found out she was pregnant. Seeing him again wrecked the mockery of a life she pretended to be leading. She needed Zac Casper, or whatever his real name might be. She needed to play out whatever it was between them.

She knew it was beyond

complicated and she understood it was dangerous, but she didn't care.

She unlocked the apartment door and went in. "I'm back!" she called out to Parker.

"Hi, Mom," he said, skidding on his socked feet like a cross-country skier.

For the eight hundredth time, her head popped up to scan the ceilings for cameras. Knowing they were under surveillance had made her self-conscious in her own home, and she'd developed a sense of performance anxiety, as if her mothering skills or home-making skills were on constant display for some kind of reality TV

show. She hadn't found any evidence of the equipment, not that she knew what to look for. And who monitored it? Just Zac? Or his boss?

She went still, an idea occurring to her. Zac had come back into their lives when he believed they were in danger. Perhaps she could lure him out by making him believe they were in danger again. But what could she do? Fake an asthma attack? No, he might just send the paramedics. Ditto with setting a fire, not that she would actually risk their safety that way.

No, it needed to be something spy-like. Some kind of danger only he could save her from. Her mind ran back over the facts. A family member of hers had

been a member of the organization but had gone missing. Her dad? But he'd died when she was fifteen. Unless his death was a lie. A cold prickle ran across her arms. That must be it. Who else would show up at her sister's wedding?

Her lungs constricted and she rubbed her sternum. *Had he been there?* Had he been there and Zac just hadn't seen him? Hot tears welled in her eyes, overcome suddenly with the grief of her fifteen-year-old self.

"Mom?"

She faked a cough.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I need my inhaler, could

you bring it to me?”

“Yeah, okay,” Parker said, clearly not believing her. He found the inhaler in her purse and brought it to her, watching as she administered a dose.

“Why are you sad?”

She shook her head. “I just missed my dad for a minute there,” she said in a wavering voice.

Parker’s cheeks sagged. “I miss my dad, too,” he said.

She pulled him against her in a rough embrace. “I know, baby. I know. I’m sorry.” She kissed the top of his head.

His arms wound tightly around her waist. Then he broke away and trotted off without a word. Sighing, she sank

into a chair in the kitchen to think. She could pretend to meet him. That might drive Zac to follow, but it didn't really put her into danger, so he wouldn't reveal himself. So maybe she could pretend to meet someone else? A mystery person whom he might think was another hit man? Maybe in a bad part of town...at night. Like Lincoln Park, where the gangs and drug dealers hung out. Her lungs began to close at the thought, but she shoved away fear. Zac would be there. He wouldn't let anything happen to her.

Unless he wasn't still watching them and didn't follow her. She could bring a gun. She had a pistol of her

dad's, and she might even remember how to use it, though the lessons he'd given her were long past.

It was a stupid, crazy idea, but the more she thought about it, the more stubbornly fixated she became, until she picked up her phone and arranged a sleepover that weekend for Parker.

* * *

Zac peeled back the skin on the knife wound across his ribs and soaked up the blood with a washcloth. Applying a thin layer of superglue to the edges, he pressed them back together, moving efficiently down the six-inch gash until it was completely closed. It went deep

enough that he could see bone, but hadn't found its way between the ribs to damage any organs. He peered in the mirror and did the same with the small gash over his left eye. His face was swollen, his lip split, and he had bruises across his ribs where bullets had impacted his Kevlar vest. The gash on his side had been made through the vest, a testament to sharpness of the hunting knife. All in all, he'd come out of the assignment in excellent shape. In a few hours, he'd be back on a plane to the States.

Not that he would contact Becca when he got there.

But he liked to be close to them.

He opened his laptop and pulled up

the security feed from their apartment, his software highlighting the moments of action so he didn't need to review hours of sleeping or an empty apartment. He watched a scene of Becca picking up her phone. In addition to the audio feed, words spoken were automatically transcribed and ran across the bottom of the screen.

“Who is this?” Becca demanded. The tension in her tone made him sit up straight, adjust the laptop and pay attention.

“What?” she asked sharply. She was quiet a long time, listening. “Ten o'clock on Saturday at the northwest corner of Lincoln Park. All right, I'll be

there,” she said tersely.

Lincoln Park? The gang-infested neighborhood? Who the hell would she be meeting there? He whipped open the records of her cell phone calls and tried to match the number to the time on the video. Nothing. No incoming calls that day at all. What the hell? He double-checked the date and time of the video, then returned to the cell phone log.

He replayed the video, listening to the amplitude of her voice, noting the way her eyes darted along the ceiling, as if she were looking for cameras.

Damn her. It was a ruse. But what was she up to? And then he understood—she was luring him out. This was her way of making contact with him. But

now she needed him to protect her, and he was not even in the same country.

He picked up his phone and dialed Marcus.

“Ghostman.”

“I need your help.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s new?”

“It’s personal. Again.”

Marcus whistled. “Twice in one week. I’d say you have a problem, Ghost.”

“I know.”

“What is it?”

He sighed and rubbed the top of his closely shorn head.

“I need you to go to the northwest corner of Lincoln Park tonight and make

sure nobody bothers El Demo's daughter."

"El Demo's daughter, eh? If you're asking for my help, you'd better own that she's more than El Demo's daughter to you."

He blew his breath out through his teeth, but didn't answer.

Marcus chuckled. "All right, I'm just giving you a hard time, Ghost. I'll be there to keep an eye on your girl, but what's the game?"

"No game. Well, that's not true—it *is* a game. I think she's hoping I'll show up."

"Ah. Smart girl. She's got your number, hasn't she?"

He didn't answer.

“Mmm hmm,” Marcus said knowingly. “What happened with the stinging bee, is he onto it?”

“Yeah, he saw the kid and there’s no hiding the resemblance. He’s got my balls in a sling now. All the more reason not to be there tonight, I guess. I can count on you to handle it?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Thanks. Listen, did you get any more on who called the Angel? From the inside, I mean?”

There was a silence on the other end that made his senses sharpen, a sense of foreboding creeping over him.

“I can’t be sure.”

“Who?” he demanded, raising his

voice, his adrenals popping into gear and sending his body into hyper-drive.

When Marcus didn't answer, he snapped, "Tell me, Marcus!"

"It might have been Beatty. But I can't verify."

Goosebumps stood up on his arms as a kind of white heat flooded his veins. "Mother fucker," he swore softly. "Why would he put out a kill on El Demo from the outside, when he already has one on the inside?"

"I don't know," Marcus said. "Because he has something to hide? Something he wouldn't want El Demo to tell another agent?"

He stood up and paced his hotel room. "Maybe. Or could it be he already

knew about me and he doesn't think I'd do it?"

"Would you?" Marcus asked.

Zac didn't know the answer to that. Becca thought her father was dead already. And the man had sold state secrets, although they hadn't caused much harm. It wasn't like he leaked the identities of his fellow agents—he had turned over plans for an operation that had already been called off, which could mean he had been trying to minimize damage. But that could also mean he had some reason for doing it that he might want to tell another agent about...

"I don't know, Marcus. A week ago I would have said yes. But now it's

more personal.” He blew out his breath with a hiss, still pacing the room. “I’m in deep, aren’t I?”

Marcus was silent. “Family comes first,” he said with uncharacteristic gruffness.

He remembered the reason Marcus worked an analyst job rather than in the field was because he had a wife and two girls. It had been the reason he’d trusted Marcus with the secret of his son. It was Marcus who’d known how to plant Zac Casper into the marine pension system and it was Marcus who had dressed in a uniform and delivered the fake death notice to Becca. In exchange, he’d made sure Marcus had become rich along with him, as field agents often received the

benefit of seized currency or goods that couldn't be traced. It was unofficially considered part of their compensation for being non-existent and risking their lives on a daily basis for their country.

He looked at his watch. "It's 9 p.m. your time. Get there early, okay?"

Marcus snorted. "I think I can handle it."

"I know. Thanks."

Chapter Four

Becca drove around Lincoln Park in her car, the windows and doors locked tight, her heart slamming in her chest. Not unlike her peaceful Golden Hill neighborhood, people were out on the street, lounging on porches and steps, walking the sidewalks. Except here, she could feel a menacing energy from them. No, maybe she was just making that up. Poor didn't translate to mean. But they were all watching her because she was out of place. She probably looked suspicious driving so slowly, looking out her windows like a nervous old lady. She pulled her inhaler out of her purse

and took a puff, fortification against the closing walls of her lungs.

Look confident. She pulled over, finding a spot to parallel park on the street and inched the car back and forth until it fit, feeling a dozen eyes watching her progress. She got out and slammed the door too loudly, trying not to make a show of setting the alarm. Crossing the street, she walked quickly up the block toward the park.

Fuck. Was she being followed? But wait, it could be Zac. Except no, two men were walking a half a block behind her, appearing to be looking for trouble. Quickening her pace, she walked to the northwest corner of the park, looking around for a bench to sit and wait. There

was nothing, and as she stood there, she realized she probably looked like she was waiting to make a drug deal or something. Jesus, what had she been thinking? This had been a stupid idea. There was no guarantee Zac even heard her faked phone conversation, much less that he would show up. She looked around, scanning all the people for the right height and general appearance. No match.

The two men who had been behind her arrived and stood in her personal space, giving her a bold once-over. “What’s a pretty lady like you doing on a night like this?” one of them drawled. The other snickered, and picked the

strap of her purse off her shoulder, sliding it down her arm.

“Hey,” she protested, but her voice was barely a squeak, her breath leaving her as her lungs constricted. She looked around wildly—for Zac—for anyone who might help her. Nobody even seemed to notice. She couldn’t let them have her purse; they’d get everything—her wallet, her phone, her keys, and her car—and then she’d be completely screwed. She yanked back on the purse and the man backhanded her across the mouth. She lost the purse, stumbling back. She expected them to run, now that they had what they wanted, but they didn’t. Instead, the one who didn’t have her purse lunged forward and grabbed

her arm, yanking her up against him. “Where you going so fast?” he demanded, running the backs of his fingers down her cheek, then snatching her around the neck.

She was seeing stars, not so much from being choked, but because her own traitorous lungs had closed long before the fingers tightened around her neck. Another man appeared, a ball cap pulled sideways on his head, silver chains around his neck. He pulled a gun and the vision left her eyes completely for a moment, but a deep voice said, “Let her go and give me the bag, or I blow both your brains out.”

The fingers crushing her throat

released and she stumbled to keep her footing.

“Don’t turn around. Just walk away and don’t look back. *Don’t* look motherfucking back, I said!”

As her vision cleared, she saw the two would-be attackers walking away, their swagger no less pronounced despite the gun trained on their backs. She blinked at her rescuer, trying to somehow make him into Zac, but he wasn’t. He was too short and older than Zac. He shoved her purse at her without looking away from the men. “Get back in your car and drive away. You don’t belong here,” he said and started walking away, following her attackers.

He had a belly, but he held his back

military-straight and the way he handled the gun was professional. The image of him in a marine uniform, holding his hat and informing her of Zac's death flashed before her eyes. She jogged forward. "Wait!" she gasped. She wanted to grab his arm, but it was attached to the hand holding the gun, so she stopped in mid-lunge. "Wait. Where's Zac?" she panted. "Ghost! Where's Ghost?"

He turned and met her eye. "He's not here," he said and the relief she felt just to have him acknowledge the existence of Zac was almost greater than her relief at his timely rescue. "Get back in your car and drive away." His head remained perfectly still, facing her, but

his eyes roved alertly, as if he were taking in every possible threat. “Go home. Don’t come back again—Zac won’t come for you.” He turned and walked away again, as he had before, leaving her glued to the cement, frozen in the chill of his words. She fumbled for her inhaler, taking one puff, then another, willing her feet to move toward her car as her mind shut down all coherent thought.

She got into the car, buckled her belt, and started the engine, working her way out of her parking spot without caring who watched. She pulled out and stopped at a red light, which blurred into waves as hot tears flooded her vision.

Zac won't come for you.

But why not? His choice or someone else's? Was he still alive? Was he still monitoring her, or had someone else alerted this agent?

She went home and crawled into bed, hiding her head under the covers and blocking out all thought as she slid into dark, menacing dreams. She slept until noon, knowing Parker would be at his friend's until evening and not feeling up to anything. She had to face it—Zac was not coming back into their lives. Depressed, she crawled out of bed and stood in the shower until it went cold, as if she might wash away all vestiges of the inane hope she'd been harboring.

Drying off, she walked back into

the bedroom naked, gasped, and stopped cold. Zac sat on the edge of her bed, a grim expression on a face bruised and cut, his belt folded in his hand.

“You are in so much trouble,” he said.

* * *

Becca stared at him with wide eyes, flashes of shock, joy, and fear flying over her face. She gave a strangled bark of laughter as her eyes filled with tears. He dropped the belt as he stood and wrapped his arms around her. Her naked breasts pressed against his ribs, her bare skin so soft under his fingers. “Shh, it’s okay,” he whispered

against her temple, kissing her citrus-smelling hair. “It’s okay, sweetheart.” She gave a muffled giggle/sob into his shirt and he ran his palms up and down the smooth lines of her back, hoping his callused hands didn’t feel too rough. “Shh, baby. You’re all right. Just breathe.”

He planted little kisses across her temple and into her hair, cradling her face and holding her sweet, vulnerable form against him.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I will find a way for you to contact me. I’ll figure something out.”

She gave another laughing sob.

He altered his voice from soothing to firm. “You don’t need to do anything

as incredibly stupid as that again.” He slapped her ass with a resounding crack. She squeezed her cheeks together and pressed her hips closer to him. He slapped her again and again on the same cheek and she clung more tightly to him, wrapping her arms around his waist, leaning into him as if for comfort despite the fact that it was he who was inflicting the pain. He reached further to swat the other cheek, to make it even, and his thigh pressed between hers. She ground her hips over it, the warm moisture of her pussy dampening his pants. His own breath quickened and his cock swelled as he spanked harder, as hard as he could manage from their position. She

rubbed her eager sex up and down over his thigh, whimpers of pain sounding remarkably similar to the cries of ecstasy, making his cock strain at his pants.

He put his lips near her ear, still spanking, keeping his hand loose and enjoying the frenzy of pleasure and pain he was working into her. "I'm going to spank you, and then I'm going to whip you, and then I'm going to paddle you," he said in a low growl. "And if you're lucky I might fuck you when I'm done. But I do promise you won't sit comfortably tomorrow."

She shuddered and he realized she'd climaxed, giving a strangled screech of protest, gluing her body to his

as her pelvis jerked, her muscular buns tightening, her legs clamping firmly around his thigh. He squeezed her ass with one hand and held her against him with an arm around her waist until she stopped jerking, then pulled her to the bed where he guided her over his lap. He nudged his knee up, shifting her body to angle her rear end high in the air, making it a perfect target. He began a new set of spanks. She laid heavily over him, spent from her climax, the endorphins probably counteracting most or all of the pain he was attempting to inflict on her pink bottom.

“Don’t you ever take a risk like that again,” he growled, smacking the backs

of her thighs, which won him a reactionary kick and squeal.

“I won’t!” she gasped. “I promise!” Her peaches-and-cream skin was a pretty shade of pink already, the outline of his fingers appearing with each swat.

“You’ve been a very bad girl,” he scolded, continuing to abuse the backs of her thighs, where he seemed to be able to make an impression.

“Ouch! I’m sorry!”

He stopped and rubbed her cheeks, relishing the feel of her firm muscle, so perfectly shaped. “Let’s see,” he said musingly. “What is it they say? Not half as sorry as you’re going to be?”

She groaned. He pushed her to stand between his knees, her hardened

nipples impudently close to his face. He resisted the temptation to take one into his mouth. That would come later. This was discipline. He dragged his eyes higher to her face and gripped her thighs, giving her a little shake. “That was stupid, Becca!”

“I know!” she exclaimed, her face flushed and her eyes wild.

“Go stand in the corner.”

“Yes, sir,” she mumbled, turning away quickly, as if relieved not to be under his scrutiny any longer. She pressed her nose so far in the corner, she leaned her forehead against it. A tremor ran through his body straight to his already eager cock at the sight of her, so

exquisite in full nudity, the pink of her spanked skin and the humility of her pose conveying utter submission. He'd never craved submission from a woman before he'd had it from her, but now... the power of it, the trust—that was it, wasn't it?

He had very little trust in his life. His government trusted him enough to kill, to not roll over under torture, to carry out missions no one else would or could. But they might just as easily order his death on a whim. So that wasn't trust. And there was the tenuous trust between other agents—with Marcus perhaps more than others. But that, too, was false. If he showed up unexpectedly at any one of their homes, they'd pull out a

gun and shoot him before asking questions. All of them lived in as much fear of being eliminated by their own organization as by an enemy. No, Becca was the first person who trusted him, and who made him want desperately to be worthy of her gift. Her trust unsteadied him, even as it shored him.

“Come back to me, Becca,” he said, his voice soft with tenderness.

She came back, eying him uncertainly. He picked up his belt from the floor and stood as he doubled it, watching the way her eyes flickered from his face to the implement. He cupped her chin. “You’re not going to cry French fry on me today, are you?” he

asked.

“No, sir,” she whispered.

“Good girl. Now bend over the bed and hold your own wrists behind your back.”

She took the position, her hesitation seeming to be over a desire to get his instructions right rather than out of unwillingness. She folded her arms behind her, gripping her own wrists.

“Good girl.” He brought the strap down with enough force to make her jerk and gasp, then repeated the action again and again, not allowing her to catch her breath or manage her emotions.

Her toes began to scramble on the floor as she wriggled in pain. He saw a sheen of sweat break out on the skin of

her back. She released her wrists, then caught them again, her natural instincts to avoid pain clearly battling with her desire to please him.

He whipped her hard, because this was a lesson he truly wanted her to learn, beyond any kind of kinky fun and games they might play. Her safety meant everything to him. He would kill or die for her, and to have her take such a needless, stupid risk wasn't something he would let slide.

He whipped until the sound of a sob made him falter. He didn't want to go on. He'd spanked soundly and she was already crying. His urge to protect pushed to the foreground, as he let go

any desire to teach her a lesson. He cursed himself for promising a paddling as well. Dropping the belt, he rolled her up into his arms, kissing her wet cheek. A sting behind his own eyes surprised him and he blurted out its cause in a choked voice: "I love you, Becca."

* * *

She'd been hiding her face against his chest, but her eyes flew open at his words as she stared at him in surprise. He looked shocked himself, as if he hadn't meant to say such a thing out loud. He blinked rapidly.

"Speak low if you speak love," she

murmured.

His brow furrowed, then cleared.
“Shakespeare?”

She nodded, reaching up to touch his cheek, then pulled his head down to hers, her mouth hungry for his, her tongue aggressive. His hands tightened on her, and he lifted her as he stood, returning her kiss with a heat and urgency that sent an enthusiastic spasm through her pussy.

He broke the kiss and tossed her back on the bed, peeling his shirt off in one swift motion, unbuttoning his pants as he climbed over her. The sight of an angry gash across his ribs made her gasp, but he ignored it, grabbing her knees and pushing them back to her

shoulders, rolling her up like a ball and opening her sex to him. She jerked as his warm tongue licked into her, already just one stroke away from orgasm. The fresh pain of the whipping morphed into nothing more than a titillating sensation to track, along with the stimulation of his fingers pinching and tugging on one nipple as he worked his magic below.

“Please,” she pleaded, palming his head as his tongue penetrated and retreated, then circled her clit. She moaned and pushed his face into her, unable to move her hips against him in the position he had her pinned. “Please...Zac. Please,” she begged. She fought for control of her legs, but he

smacked her flayed butt to keep her in place, turning her to mush with the evoked submission.

He slid two fingers inside, finding her g-spot. She let out a squeal, panic at her loss of control welling up moments before she squirted. Embarrassed, she tried to squirm away, but Zac didn't relent.

“Oh, yeah, Becca,” he murmured approvingly at the squirt, pumping his fingers in and out of her, hitting the g-spot each time until her muscles clamped down on his fingers and she howled with the orgasm that ripped through her. Her entire body trembled as he gradually released her knees and slid his fingers out of her. She collapsed in a limp heap,

panting, staring up at him. He climbed over her, settled his hips between her legs, and murmured in her ear. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten that paddling.”

Another spasm flitted through her pussy, even as her mind rebelled. Her butt was on fire, and the pain went deeper than the surface, so she was sure Zac’s promise she wouldn’t sit comfortably would come true. She absolutely did not want—could not take—an additional paddling.

She reached her hand down, slipping her hand in his unbuttoned pants. “Does this mean I’m getting lucky?”

He cracked a grin, the first she’d

seen since he arrived, transforming his face from the blank but intense mask to a boyish mug. “Didn’t you already?” he asked, but he was reaching in his pocket, pulling out a condom.

She wanted to suck his cock, to return the favor for the pleasure he’d given her, but she didn’t know the rules of the game. Was she supposed to ask permission? “Wait,” she said when he ripped open the foil package. He paused, the blank mask returning to his face. “I want to...I mean, may I...uh,” she tightened her grip on his cock and gave him a push. The smile returned as he allowed her to roll him onto his back and free his hardened cock from his boxer briefs, watching with glittering

eyes. She crawled over him, but he grabbed her waist and pulled her to the side, so she was perpendicular to his body. He slapped her ass, demonstrating the reason for the position. "I need to be able to punish you if require correction," he said silkily and she felt a dribble of moisture leak from her pussy.

He ran his hand over her blistered backside, reminding her of his dominance as she circled the rim of his cock with her tongue, and his hand squeezed when she took one long, slow lick from balls to tip. She was not so very experienced with giving head; in fact, her earliest attempts back in college had required a great deal of liquor, but

she read a lot of smut, and her desire to please him made her eager. She took him into her mouth as far as she could without gagging, then positioned the head of his penis in the pocket of her cheek and slid up and down his length in that placement. She tasted the salt of a bit of pre-cum and was fascinated to discover how, when mixed with her saliva, it turned into a viscous lubricant, speeding her lips up and down along his straining cock.

“Slow down,” he commanded, smacking her sore ass.

She whimpered and obeyed, slowing her strokes, then pulling off to lick around the rim again. His fingers slid into her swollen slit and in her

enthusiasm, she began to pump her mouth over him rapidly. He slapped her ass again and let his finger wander to her tight asshole. She listed away from him, embarrassed, and he smacked her ass again.

“Lie down, Becca,” he commanded. “On your belly.”

She pulled off his cock and sucked in her breath, wondering if he was going to fuck her ass. She had never had anal sex before, and the idea made her nervous. He kneaded her punished cheeks, then parted them. She buried her face in the comforter. He pushed at her tight entrance with his thumb.

“I bought you a butt plug, Becca,”

he said softly. "And a special paddle."

Her heart hammered in her chest, excitement and fear pumping in equal measures. She heard the sound of the condom and then his cock slipped into her dripping pussy.

"We'll save them for later," he murmured.

Relieved, she arched her back, moving back to meet him. He fit his body over hers, his front to her back, his hands holding her shoulders from the front for leverage. He pressed firmly against her sore bottom, reminding her with each thrust of his punishment and her submission, making her wetter than she'd ever been before. He pounded into her roughly and she reveled in it,

spreading her legs and lifting her ass, letting him drive. She heard his breath start to catch and she encouraged, “Yes, Zac!”

He pinched one of her nipples hard when he came, sending her into another powerful orgasm.

She caught her breath, loving the feel of his full weight pressing her into the mattress.

He nipped her ear and she giggled.

“Am I crushing you?”

“No. No, don’t—” she protested as he withdrew and discarded the condom.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said, settling beside her, resting on one elbow and stroking her hair back from her face.

Yet.

The satisfaction of his return, of her multiple orgasms and even of his punishment—because it had been satisfying, even though she'd hated it at the time—was perversely shadowed by the knowledge that this moment would end.

“You’re going to walk right back out of our lives, aren’t you?”

Chapter Five

It was not often he felt helpless. Maybe never. Complete confidence in his own power was the trait that helped him survive desperate situations. But Becca's question froze him like the proverbial deer in the headlights.

This was what it was to love, then. Helplessness. An attachment to something that could be taken away or lost. The ache of it made him feel like an old man.

He didn't want to lie to her, or even pretend things would be all right. He shrugged. "I'm not supposed to be in your life to begin with. It wasn't my plan

to pop in and out. You're the one who summoned me here, remember?"

He thought she might cry, but she was braver than that. She sat up, crawled off the bed, and started dressing. "But you're going to give me a way to contact you?" She'd turned her back to him as she pulled on a pair of pants.

"Yeah. I'll figure something out. It can't be traceable, so it will change frequently, but I'll keep you notified."

She turned and looked at him, her gaze steady. "I want to see you again."

The joy her words produced instantly collided with reality. He rubbed his head, wondering how it came about they were negotiating what wasn't

negotiable. “No.” Frustration leaked through. “I can’t, Becca, and I’ve already explained why not.”

She stared at him for a long time, then turned and walked quietly out of the room. Heaviness descended on him like he’d inhaled poison gas. Staying fluid, he took her cue, dressed and slipped out the window, which was how he’d entered.

Back in his own apartment, he checked all communications, then turned on the shower. Standing under the water, he felt his injuries for the first time, rather than just observing them—the sting of the cuts, the ache of the bruises. He was an old man already.

He dried off, dressed, and went to the kitchen to make himself a sandwich. He ate it, but it did not fill the emptiness within him. His habit now would be to check the video feeds on Becca. It was how he filled the gaping holes of his time and existence. But that would be stupid, wouldn't it? He was just there. And she didn't need looking in on. He put on a ball cap and left the building, driving to Pacific Beach, where he locked his gun, shoes, and shirt in the car, rolled up the cuffs of his khakis and walked out to the beach, treading carefully to avoid the broken glass left by drunken partygoers the night before. Once on the beach he broke into a run,

ignoring the bikini-clad blondes and the bronzed surfers. He ran long past the sunset, until the sky was black and the moon rose, lighting the black ocean to a shimmering deep blue. He ran until he admitted it hadn't changed the way he felt, and wasn't going to, and gave up, his feet raw as he walked barefooted back to his car.

At home, he repeated his earlier actions of showering and eating, then like an addict, opened up the video feed. Parker was home, Becca was just kissing him goodnight. She walked into her bedroom and changed into pajamas, her breasts springing free from her black lace bra before she stretched the thin cotton top over them. She peeled off her

pants and looked in the mirror at the marks he'd left, running her hand over her muscular cheeks. Her eyes caught the bag he'd left near the bed and his heart began to beat a little faster. She opened it and pulled out the Lexan paddle, butt plug, and lube he'd bought, examining each one with a stricken look. She sat on the edge of the bed, holding the paddle against her forehead, and started to cry.

He shouldn't have left the items. He hadn't done it to be cruel; he'd only thought she might have better use for them than he would, but that had been beyond stupid. She was hurt and it was his fault. Again.

He watched as her tears turned into

all-out sobs and he jumped to his feet and started to pace. His heart was beating faster than it did in combat. This couldn't go on. He couldn't function this way—he was going to get all of them killed if he didn't get his head together. He picked up his glass and hurled it, taking no satisfaction when it shattered against the wall.

He turned off all the lights and sat in the darkness in hopes it would help him think. His gut was telling him to get back into Becca's apartment, to wrap his arms around her and take away her pain. But in this one instance, he could not trust his gut. His instincts spelled danger. They were clouded by his own desires, confused by his fears. How long

he sat there, he wasn't sure, but before any coherent thought had formed, his body was up and moving, as it always did—action preceding a plan—and he was climbing out his window, swinging onto the balcony below, then making the five-foot jump to catch the ladder that served as a fire escape. Quiet as a moonbeam, he crawled down on it, then scaled sideways to Becca's bedroom window, which he easily popped open to slide soundlessly inside.

She wasn't in her bedroom, but he could hear her coming down the hall. Knowing she would be startled, and not wanting her to scream and wake Parker, he positioned himself behind the door,

so she didn't see him when she walked in. Clapping his hand over her mouth and his arm around her waist, he pulled her body against his.

“Shh, it's me,” he said the moment her muffled shriek ended. He removed his hand from her mouth, feeling her breath grow frantic. She squirmed in his arms, but he held her fast, speaking into her ear. “Calm your breath. Make each exhale longer.” He placed his hand on her abdomen, beneath her belly button. “Breathe all the way down here.”

“What—what are you doing?” she gasped.

“This is how it's going to be,” he informed her, as if he were instructing one of his captives in the rules of

engagement. “I will be here when I can. I can’t tell you when or how often. I probably won’t use the front door. You can’t tell anyone about me, and Parker needs to keep it a secret, too. That’s the best I can do, Becca.”

She stood perfectly still.

“Take it or leave it.”

* * *

“I hate you, Zac,” she muttered, and as quickly as he had snatched her up, he released her, stepping back. She whirled, disappointed he’d let her go. His face was stone, his eyes alert on her face. Tears welled in her eyes and she didn’t bother to stop them from spilling.

“I hate you for showing up and I hate you for leaving. I was happy—well, maybe not happy, but I was content enough before you reappeared. And now—” she broke off. “You ruined it.” She gave him a shove that didn’t move him.

“Do you...want me to leave?” he asked in a strained voice.

She hurled a fist at his chest. “No, I don’t fucking want you to leave!” She punched his ribs as hard as she could, using both fists, pummeling him, while he put his hands on her shoulders to calm her. “I don’t want you to leave,” she sobbed. “I don’t want you to ever leave again.” She continued hitting him, hurting her knuckles far more than she was hurting him. “And I hate you for turning

me into this pathetic female who is hanging on the leg of her man to stay,” she wept.

He released her shoulders and took a step back from her and she launched herself at him, wrapping her legs around his waist, slapping at his face and head. “I accept your stupid conditions! Obviously I have no pride whatsoever and I’ll just take any scrap you can throw me!”

“Becca...” his voice was strangled, “you’re killing me.”

The tears in his voice brought her out of herself. She froze, unnerved, like when a child sees their parent cry. She found his eyes and saw they were moist.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “That wasn’t fair.”

A dampness on her inner thigh made her look down and she gasped—his shirt was soaked through with blood, which had smeared all over her leg.

“Oh, my God! I’m literally killing you!” She twisted to get off him, but he held her fast.

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. Let me go!” She remembered the wound on his side, and realized with horror she had punched him there. “Oh, my God, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. Let me down, Zac!”

“No,” he said stubbornly.

She started laughing—hysterical,

tearful giggles. She leaned her forehead against his. “Zac,” she whispered beseechingly.

He released her legs and she pulled her thigh away as she slid down. “You need a doctor.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s fine. Do you have any superglue?”

“Are you serious?”

He nodded.

She stared at the growing bloodstain, feeling light-headed. “Yeah, okay,” she said, trying to pull herself together. She grabbed a towel from her bathroom and tossed it to him. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be right here,” he promised.

When she returned with the

superglue, he was standing in her bathroom, his shirt off, the towel pressed to his gash. “Thanks,” he said, taking it from her, then he pushed the door gently closed. “You don’t have to watch.”

She gave a nervous laugh. “How did you know?” she said through the partly open door, looking purposefully away.

“I’ve got your number.”

Her chest tightened at the reminder that this man knew everything about her while she knew nothing about him, but the sting didn’t last as long as it had before. There was pleasure with it—it was nice to be known, to be understood. And with the creepy vibe diminished, it

was nice to know she was watched over.

“But I still don’t know you,” she said softly, leaning against the door frame. His sky blue eyes peered through the crack.

“Yes, you do.”

Her breath left her in the warmth of his gaze and she nudged open the door and walked around behind him, trailing her fingernails over his muscled back, taking care not to look at his wound.

She wanted to know him.

“You know me better than anyone,” he said, meeting her eyes in the mirror when she peeked around. He shrugged. “If I exist in any form—if there is a man to know—I would want him to be the one I am when I’m with you.”

She rested her cheek against his warm back, her hands at his waist.

“Go and take your clothes off, Becca. I made you a promise earlier I didn’t get to keep,” he said, making her catch her breath.

Her butt was way too sore for more spanking. She leaned around him to look at his face, instead of the mirror. “French fry?” she tried, innocently.

He grinned. “No chance. You’re still in big trouble with me, and I’m not going to let you weasel out of it. If you ever pull a stunt like that again, today’s spanking will just be the warm-up, understand?”

She tried not to show the effect

those words had on her—the way her clit spasmed and her panties dampened. The way her knees went weak with instant submission, even as her mind rebelled against any more pain ever again. “Yes, sir.”

“Take your clothes off and bend over the side of the bed.”

“Zac—”

“Yes?”

She hesitated, struggling between loving his dominance and feeling certain she couldn't take another spanking. “Zac?” she repeated in a smaller voice, when no other words came.

“I'd be scared, too, if I were you,” he said, reading her like a book. “You have ten seconds to get your clothes off

and bend over that bed. One...two..."

"Wait! Okay!"

She scrambled out of her clothes and leaned over the edge of the bed as instructed.

"Zac?" she tried again.

He chuckled. "Do I need to find a gag for you?"

"No, sir," she whispered, craning her neck to look over her shoulder anxiously.

Zac came and leaned on his forearms next to her, mimicking her position. She searched his face, wearing a pleading expression on her own.

"I know," he said, with absolute confidence. She opened her mouth to

clarify what he knew, then shut it. *He knew.* Of course he knew. He knew she was exhausted from it all and couldn't take much more. He knew she was scared. He probably also knew her limits.

Her eyelids fluttered. "I trust you," she whispered.

An unidentifiable emotion flickered across his face. "What a gift," he said, his voice hoarse. He kissed her forehead and retreated, leaving her to listen to his exploration of the implements he'd left there earlier.

She felt something cool and flat press against her sore ass. "This is a paddle made of Lexan. Supposedly it packs quite a sting without leaving

bruises.” The paddle left her bottom, and she held her breath, but it was replaced by his hand, which stroked in a lazy figure eight. “Which is good, because you may already be bruised. I tried to give you enough of a warm-up, but that was a pretty serious spanking you took earlier.”

She whimpered, not needing to be reminded of it. “Zac?” she continued her inane repetition of his name, though what she meant to communicate, she couldn’t say.

“I like the way you say my name,” he murmured.

She wondered briefly what other names he went by, but all thought left

when he brought the paddle down with a crack. She gasped, then moaned. He hadn't put much force behind it, but he was right—it packed a sting.

She squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the next smack. Instead, his fingers slid between her thighs, finding her swollen pussy and dipping into the moisture there, spreading it around.

“Uhhh,” she groaned, hungry for him.

“You’re pretty wound up, aren’t you, baby girl?”

“Mmm?”

His exploration of her pussy seemed without ambition, despite the way she pushed back against him, and waggled her hips from side to side.

“This afternoon wasn’t enough for you, huh? You want to come again?”

“Yessss.”

His hand withdrew and he slapped her ass, surprising her.

“Ow!”

He rubbed the area lightly. “Mmm hmm. Punishment, remember?”

“Yes, sir.”

She sensed him picking up the paddle again and one of her legs began to tremble. He stroked her with the cool plastic, running the flat blade in circles over her antagonized flesh. White hot pain exploded as he gave her two swift smacks.

She shifted her weight from foot to

foot, doing a little dance. “Oh, oh, oh.”

His fingers entered her hot core again, deeper this time and she moaned with what she hoped was encouragement. When he withdrew this time, she braced herself for more spanking, but he surprised her again with the application of a cool liquid on her asshole. She jumped with a little shriek, her hips swimming away from him.

He made a tscking sound and applied three more slaps of the paddle, causing her to howl in protest. “Naughty, naughty girl. Hold still or I’ll skip the fun and just give you the spanking.”

She whimpered, honestly not sure whether she considered what he had in mind as “fun” at all. He held her hip and

rubbed the lube in a circle around her anus. She felt the pressure of a soft bulbous tip and identified it as the butt plug. “Zac?”

He answered by breaching her hole and plunging the plug inside her. She gasped as the sensation filled her. Almost immediately, his fingers worked her clit, teasing it with tantalizing circles, then catching it with the heel of his hand when he plunged his fingers deeper. She was on the brink of orgasm within seconds, pleading for a release.

“You like that, don’t you, sweet baby?”

“Ye-es!” she gasped.

He twisted the plug within her back

hole as his fingers expertly delivered everything she craved lower down.

“Oh, God, oh, God! Zac!” She let out a long squeal as her climax exploded from her core to her extremities and back again.

Twenty minutes later, her wrists were tied to the headboard, her ass was still filled with the butt plug, and Zac’s head was between her thighs. The click of Parker’s bedroom door proved just how quick her lover’s reflexes were—in the five seconds it took for her bedroom door to open, he untied her, pulled a sheet up over her, and rolled under the bed.

“Mama?” came Parker’s sleepy voice.

“Yeah, baby?”

“Is my dad here?” he asked in a puzzled voice.

She froze. Should they tell him? Zac’s voice came from below, as he rolled out from under the bed, as if that was a perfectly normal place for him to be. “Yes, I am, son. What are you doing out of bed?”

“I dreamed you were here.”

He stood up and walked to the door. “Well, you were right! Come on, let’s get you back in bed.”

“What were you doing with Mama?”

Zac only hesitated a beat. “I was playing with her. Did we wake you up?”

“No. Will you be here in the morning?”

He led Parker out of the room and into his own. She listened to the sound of their voices. “Yeah, buddy. I’ll be here in the morning. Are you going to make me breakfast?”

“Yes!” Parker said with enthusiasm. “Do you like pancakes?”

“I sure do, come on, I’ll lie down with you.”

“What song is in your head right now?”

She heard a deep rumbling laugh. “It’s called ‘Let’s Get It On,’ by Marvin Gaye.”

She chuckled. The hum of

satisfaction running through her system had nothing to do with a throbbing bottom or the titillation of being tied up. The love being shown her kid—their kid—filled her heart more than any attention to her ever could.

* * *

Lying naked on her back, her breasts fell open, pointing to the outside. Like the rest of her, they were perfect—just enough to fit in his hands, with peach-colored nipples that angled upward, like the tilt of her freckled nose. She smiled as he circled one areola with his fingertip. “So, why high school English? I see you more as a

kindergarten teacher.”

She laughed. “Me? No way. You have to wear Christmas sweaters to teach kindergarten. No, I always wanted to be an English teacher. Literature is my life. I was the kid who always had her nose in a book—reading chapter books by the end of kindergarten. Take me to a bookstore and I could stay for hours—holding books, smelling them, studying their jackets, curling up in a chair and savoring the first crack of the spine.”

Having succeeded in making her nipple stand at attention, he moved onto its twin. Still in a post-coital languor, she lowered her lids to half-mast and regarded him.

“Do the kids give you a hard time?”

“Nah, not after the first week or so. I figure my job is to teach them to love literature as much as I do. They come in thinking Shakespeare’s an old dead guy and they leave quoting Hamlet’s soliloquy, not because I make them, but because they realize it rocks. And that is what I love about my job.”

Her passion lent a glow to her words, and he realized he’d never felt that way about anything, especially not his job.

“You really do love it, don’t you?”

She smiled. “Yeah. The first time I got a kid excited about a book, I knew

I'd found my calling. Maybe it's not as impressive as most jobs, but I know it's my purpose in life."

He stared at her, every hair on his limbs and head standing on end. Purpose in life. But what was it about those words was his intuition telling him to pay attention to? What did he need to know about his purpose in life?

* * *

Lips parted, face flushed, Becca's breath rose and fell steadily while she slept. He heard none of the rasp of asthma, as the ease of slumber softened whatever constrictions her nervous system fired when she got anxious. He

wanted to take away all the worries that made her gasp for breath. He only wanted to hear her gasp in pleasure, under his ministrations.

She opened her green eyes and blinked at him, a moment of confusion as she processed his presence in her bed.

“Good morning,” he murmured.

“Mmm,” she smiled. “Were you just lying awake watching me?”

“Yeah.” He rolled her to her back and climbed over, resting his weight on his elbows. “Listen, I want to talk to you.”

She stiffened—another anxiety he wanted to erase.

“Yesterday I didn’t honor your safe word. I want you to know if I’d really

thought—”

“I know,” she interrupted, and he understood. She didn’t want to hear it spelled out that she’d had a choice—the idea of having the control wrested from her was part of the turn-on.

“So, do you consent to my spankings?” he asked softly. “I can punish you when I choose, whether you want it or not?”

He felt her nipples harden against his chest. Her lips parted and her breath stopped. He leaned down and bit her earlobe. “Breathe, Becca,” he murmured in her ear.

“Yes,” she gasped.

He kissed her neck. “Good,” he

said, “because I enjoy taking you in hand.”

Her head dropped back and she arched a little underneath him.

“But I know with great power comes great responsibility,” he said, moving to the side and rolling her to her belly. “So I’d better inspect my work to see how you came out.”

He trailed his fingers over the punished flesh, still marked with pinprick blood dots underneath the skin, and what would be a few light bruises.

“I couldn’t have taken any more,” she assured him.

He smiled and leaned down to speak in her ear again. “I’ll be the judge of that. If you don’t want it worse, you’d

better obey me in all things, sweetheart.”

Goosebumps stood up on her arms and her thighs opened. He chuckled and slid a finger between her legs, not surprised to find her pussy slick.

Not to be distracted, she tried to roll back over, but he placed a hand on her back and held her down on her belly. “But...Zac?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Um, you won’t always spank like that, will you?”

“No, sweetheart, that was a severe spanking for a severe infraction. You aren’t going to test that one again, are you?” He slid his finger along her swollen labia.

“No, sir,” she said breathlessly.

The sound of Parker’s door opening made him withdraw his hand and release her.

“Pancake time!” Parker called, throwing the door open.

He laughed and climbed out of bed, hiding his erection while he pulled on his boxer briefs. “All right, buddy. Let me take a quick shower and I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

After a shower and breakfast, Parker was kicking and punching the air. “Hey, Dad,” he said, startling Zac with his first use of the moniker, “will you teach me how to fight?”

“No,” Becca said at the same time

he said "Sure." He glanced at Becca, who was frowning, her hands on her hips.

He crossed the room and sat on the couch. "I'll tell you what, buddy," he said. "I will teach you, but first I want you to tell your mom about what's been happening to you in the school bathroom."

Parker's face closed, showing alarm, followed by anger. His jaw protruded and he folded his arms across his chest, glaring at him.

"What's happening to you at school?" Becca asked sharply.

"Nothing," he said, turning sulky with shame.

"Come here for a sec," he said,

beckoning to Parker. When the boy didn't move, he stood and reached forward, picking him up and settling him on his lap. "I bet you think you're too big for laps, don't you?"

Parker shrugged.

"Listen," he said, trying to catch his son's eye, and when failing, speaking into his hair instead. "I want you to always tell your mom when something upsets you at school, okay?"

"Why?" he grumbled to the floor.

"Well, she can help." He didn't look at Becca who was hovering nearby, looking uncertain as to whether she should interrupt.

"No, she can't."

“Yes, she can.”

“Like, how?”

“In lots of ways. Maybe she would put you in Kung Fu.”

This got the boy's attention. He looked up, hope widening his green eyes. He swallowed. “You were there, weren't you?”

It had been one of his out-of-body experiences. He'd wound up in the boys' bathroom with Parker, watching his son tormented by the boys at school, who were poking his butt with a pencil while he tried to pee in the urinal. Parker was upset and scared and the boys kept laughing and shoving him, taking his backpack and lunchbox and throwing

them in a urinal. Zac had spoken to him, and it had seemed as if Parker had heard him. “They can’t hurt you. Pick up your things and walk away. Don’t cry. Don’t look mad. Shove the one by the door when you walk out.”

Parker had done as he instructed, and Zac had tried to follow him out, but the scene had faded and he was back in his own pain-wracked body.

Parker blinked at him now. “It hasn’t happened again.”

Becca came into the living room and sat on the red micro-suede armchair. “What happened?” she asked, softly this time.

Parker climbed off Zac’s lap and sat beside him. “They were being mean

to me. They took my lunch and said they were going to flush it down the toilet.”

She nodded. “What did you do?”

“I did what Dad told me to do. I took my lunch back and pushed one of them.”

Becca’s glance skipped to his and he saw remonstrance. “It wasn’t exactly like that,” he offered lamely.

“So are you going to teach me how to fight them?” Parker asked eagerly.

“I’ll teach you how, but you’re not allowed to fight,” he said, eyeing Becca, whose lips were pursed. “Unless it’s absolutely necessary.” He touched Parker’s knee. “Knowing you *can* will keep you from ever getting into a fight.”

“Huh?”

“You were afraid that day.”

Parker’s face closed again in sulky defensiveness.

“No, listen. Those boys fed off your fear. It made them feel like they had power. But they didn’t. They don’t have power unless you choose to give it to them. And you always have a choice.”

“What if they beat me up?”

Zac shrugged. “What if they do?”

Parker’s eyes widened and he could feel Becca grow tense. “It’s not that big a deal to get beat up.”

“Zac,” Becca warned.

* * *

“No, really, it’s not,” Zac went on, his eyes flicking to her. “But what if you decided you weren’t going to let them?”

Parker stared at him. “How would that stop anything?”

“Remember what I said—your fear made them *think* they had power. If you refuse to give them power, they’ll look for someone else to bother.”

Becca wasn’t sure whether she wanted to climb over Zac and catch him in a lip lock, or tell him to keep his insane ideas to himself. She didn’t know if he could be trusted to judge what was safe for their son, considering he was a man who nonchalantly applied superglue to a wound that clearly should have been

stitched in a hospital. His advice to Parker made her nervous, but seeing him parent—the love and attention he gave to their son—expanded her heart by tenfold. And at least he had an answer for Parker. What would she have done if Parker had told her when it had happened? She would have called the principal and his teacher and demanded some kind of better supervision, but she wouldn't have known what to say to Parker—how to take away the victimization, how to repair his confidence. She got up from the overstuffed armchair and knelt at their feet, putting one hand on each of their knees. Zac went still, watching her intently.

“May I take Kung Fu, Mom?”

She looked at Zac, feeling the strangeness of sharing a parenting decision with another person. He gave a slight nod.

“Yes, I’ll look into it, Parker.”

“Yes!” he said, doing his adorable fist pump.

“I’ll research it, Becca,” Zac said, looking tentative, like he wasn’t sure how much of the parenting she would let him do. She felt a small burden lifting from her shoulders. For the first time, she had someone to share the enormous job of bringing up a child.

Later that night, after Zac had disappeared for most of the day, then

reappeared at midnight in her bed, after another session of mind-blowing sex, she ran a finger over the cut on his side. “So how did you know Parker was being bullied?”

He took a breath, then exhaled. “I was being tortured. So I left my body and I found myself with Parker.”

“Is that why they call you Ghost?”

He shook his head. “No. Nobody knows I do that.”

“How does it work?”

“I don’t know. The first time it happened, I thought I’d died. I was tied to a chair with a bag over my head and five Iraqi soldiers interrogating me. I figured I was going to endure a slow death if I wasn’t rescued.

“I’d been in continual pain for a long period of time, so the endorphins were all worn off and I was totally out of juice and then suddenly I was with you—in your old apartment. Parker was a newborn and you were in a rocking chair, nursing him. Your mom and sister were in the kitchen talking. I hadn’t seen him yet—I hadn’t even known you’d given birth already. I stood over your shoulder and looked at his tiny face, and I could see myself in it.”

Zac’s eyes filled with tears at the memory. “I thought it meant I was dead,” he said, “and my life had been worth living because I’d been a part of making that miracle.” He waved his hand. “Not

a big part, of course.”

She laughed.

“His fingers were so small,” he said, his voice choking a little.

Her own eyes swam. “He was perfect.”

“Of course he was.”

Chapter Six

Zac stayed for four days, popping in and out of their apartment at random times, never inviting them to see his own. She didn't ask for more—she had agreed to his conditions. Before he left on his next assignment, he gave her a laptop to replace her own, transferring her files and programs over. “I'll contact you through this laptop. I don't know when, but I promise you when I can, I will.”

She nodded. “What if I need to get a message to you?”

“You have to wait until I contact you first.”

She frowned.

“Come here, I want to show you something.” He bookmarked an online banking site on her browser. “Memorize this number,” he said, entering it into the account number login.

It was nine digits long. She broke it into groups of three and studied it, repeating it over and over in her head until she was sure she had it.

He clicked the cursor in the password box and entered Parker’s initials and birthdate. “Got it?” He asked.

“Got it.”

He hit enter and she stared at the screen. The account balance was over

two million dollars.

“What is this, Zac?” she asked.

“If more than a year passes without hearing from me, this is for you and Parker.”

“Does this mean you trust me more than when you transferred the hundred thousand?” she teased.

He considered her, looking serious. “Things have changed for me, yeah.”

“You’re not afraid I’ll just take your money and run?”

He looked even more serious. “You’ve put your trust in me. I’d better be able to do the same.”

Something in the way he said it made her realize how difficult this was for him—surely a man who swore he

had no relationships also existed without trust. She touched his face. “Thank you.”

* * *

She heard from him three nights later, when a chat box popped open on her laptop.

Ghost: Isn't it past your bedtime?

She smiled and put her cursor in the reply box, giggling when she saw the moniker he'd assigned her was “Pink Panties.”

Pink Panties: Says who?

Ghost: Do I need to give you one?

She grinned as the familiar thrill shot straight down her spine and into her pussy.

Pink Panties: No, sir.

Ghost: I have an assignment for you.

Pink Panties: What?

Ghost: I want you to sign up for some kind of mind-body class. Like yoga, or meditation.

Pink Panties: Why?

Ghost: I think it would help with your asthma.

That irritated her. For some reason it felt like criticism of something she couldn't control.

Pink Panties: Asthma is a medical condition. It's not psychosomatic, if that's what you're implying.

Ghost: Exacerbated by stress.

She rolled her eyes and made him wait before typing, “Maybe.”

Ghost: I want to read, “Yes, sir.”

This time the domination did nothing for her. He was overstepping, as far as she was concerned. She had no interest in being micromanaged by someone who wasn't even around to observe her daily life.

Pink Panties: I'll think about it.

Ghost: Becca, you are heading toward a punishment spanking.

A small thrill returned at those words, but the fact was, he was nowhere near her.

Pink Panties: Prove it.

Ghost: You will regret that

challenge.

A slightly larger thrill.

Ghost: I need to get off line. I don't know when it will be safe for me to contact you again, but you'll hear from me then.

An enormous disappointment.

Pink Panties: K.

Ghost: Good night, Becca.

Pink Panties: Night.

It was 19 days before she heard from him again. She was lying in her bed, her laptop on her lap, reading the domestic discipline blogs—her favorite pastime—when a video chat screen opened and Zac's light blue eyes looked at her. Excitement and bitterness shot through her, a burn akin to throwing back

a shot of tequila.

“It’s time for your punishment, Becca,” he said, flipping the contents of her belly like a pancake.

“Wha-what do you mean?”

“I’m going to discipline you now. If you cooperate, then I won’t have to use the paddle when I return.”

Her body swarmed with hot and cold tingles and she could feel her lungs closing. “Hang on a sec,” she said and stood up to grab her inhaler from the dresser, taking a puff as she returned.

Zac’s face was predictably blank, perfectly calm. “You don’t think stress has any relation to how you breathe?”

She blew out her breath and rolled

her eyes. “Well—” She didn’t really have an answer, but wasn’t about to admit he might be right.

“Set the laptop on the night table and make sure you set it up so I can see you.”

She did as instructed.

“Now I want you to pull down your pants and panties and get on your knees to show me your ass.”

A pulse of heat pumped in her pussy. Feeling extremely awkward as she watched herself reflected in the small video box, she peeled down her pants and panties.

“Not off, Becca. Just leave them around your thighs. Yes, right about there.”

She felt ridiculous, and the video-cam made it so much worse—as if she were on TV for the entire world to see.

“Now give me the full view,” he said, and she climbed onto her hands and knees on the bed, her bare butt facing the laptop. “Yes, that’s nice.” He said nothing for a moment, and she craned her neck around to look at the screen. “All right, Becca, you can climb back down. Open the drawer in the bedside table.”

She opened the drawer where he’d stored their implements and toys, titillated. “Take out the butt plug and the lubricant.”

She hesitated, meeting his eyes. This wasn’t something she really thought

she could do alone.

“You heard me,” he said sharply, and she fished out the required items, her clit pulsing. “Now, I want you to put some lube on your anus.”

She made a face, but did as instructed, her fingers trembling as she complied.

“Now, insert the plug.”

She looked at the thing doubtfully. It looked huge, and she really couldn't believe he'd put that in her ass before.

“It will fit,” he said, reading her mind.

She reached back with both hands, one holding the plug, the other seeking her sphincter. She pushed the tip against her lubricated hole and found the

rounded soft rubber tip actually felt comfortable, even pleasurable. Zac nodded at her and she felt her cheeks grow warm. She wasn't sure which would be worse, having him watch her face as she inserted it, or turning around and having him watch her ass. She struggled to insert the plug deeper and felt resistance. Her breath caught, her mouth opened into an "O."

"That's it, Becca," he murmured encouragingly.

She thrust harder, sliding it past the wide bulbous part with a grunt. There was an embarrassing pleasure at its movement inside her—as well as the sensation of being too full.

“Good girl,” he said, two words that always made her wet. “Turn around so I can see.”

Afraid it might slip out, she held it in as she turned around to show him, a touch of aroused pride mingling with humiliation.

“Mmm,” he murmured approvingly. “Very good. Now, you’ll find in the drawer an arthritis cream called Capsaicin. I want you to take it out and squeeze a tiny bit—about the size of pea—onto your finger.”

She looked at him questioningly as she obeyed, but he offered no explanation.

“Now, turn around and show me your ass, and I want you to rub it on both your cheeks, all over.”

Becca gave him her beautiful backside again, holding the plug in with one hand while she spread the cream on her cheeks. He knew it would produce a burn that would come on slowly, over the next thirty minutes, lasting for several hours with a sting as painful as a real spanking. Once the sting set in, nothing but time would take it away—washing and rubbing only increased the burn.

She turned back around, looking expectantly obedient, if not confused. Her nipples were tenting the thin t-shirt

she slept in. “Good girl, Becca. Now go and wash your hands with a lot of soap and water and then come back to me.” He didn’t want her to accidentally rub an eye or touch her pussy with the cream.

She glanced down at the pants around her thighs.

“You can take them off.”

She flushed, shooting him a turned-on and flustered glance as she peeled them off, disappearing from his view, walking awkwardly with the butt plug. He smiled at the sight of her, his cock straining at his pants. He heard the sound of running water and then she came back in sight, the butt plug still in place.

“Bend over the bed so I can watch your naughty bottom turn red,” he said,

enjoying the flicker of her lashes his words produced. She reached back to hold the butt plug in as she complied. “Yes,” he said. “Push that in a little deeper. In and out.”

He heard the sound of a muffled groan as she moved the plug inside her.

“That’s it. Keep pushing. In and out, now wiggle it a bit. Yes. If I were there, I would fuck you with that plug in your ass. I would hold you by the hair and plow into you, pushing that plug deeper as I drilled your pussy.”

She moaned again. He freed his erection from his pants, stroking himself while he watched the skin of her round cheeks turning pink. Her hand wandered

from the plug to one of her cheeks, as he imagined the sting was coming on.

“Don’t rub, little girl. It only makes it worse. I’m giving you a long distance spanking tonight, and now that it’s begun, nothing will stop you from feeling the full effects.”

She turned to peek over her shoulder at him, looking for more information. He debated whether he ought to prepare her. There was something sexy about telling her what she was going to experience, but there was something sexy about keeping her completely in the dark, as well.

“Here’s what I want to know, Becca. Do you really think you can be submissive to me? Or is it just a game

for the bedroom?” When she didn’t answer, he regretted not being able to see her face. “Turn around, sit down on that plug and your soon-to-be burning bottom and look at me.”

She pushed herself to stand and turned around, gingerly perching on the end of the bed.

“I asked you a question.”

She rubbed her nose.

“Be careful—did you really scrub your hands with soap?”

She yanked her fingers away and looked at them. “I think so,” she said doubtfully.

“Okay, I just want to be sure. I don’t want to trigger an asthma attack

because your nose is on fire.”

She gave him a wobbly smile.

“Are you willing to concede anything to me, yet?”

She gave a short laugh. “Maybe.”

“Like what?”

“I will try out a class, like you suggested.”

He couldn't help but smile. “Was that a suggestion? I rather thought it was an order—which you deliberately disobeyed. Which brings us to my previous question.”

She chewed on her lip and shifted a little, the line between her brow increasing. He guessed the sting was beginning to set in. “I don't know,” she said in a half-whisper. “I've never tried

before. I thought it was what I wanted, but...”

“It’s harder in real life than in fantasy.”

She nodded.

“What if, instead of getting hung up on who is right and who is wrong, you just kept it in the realm of what you like from your man? What if you just decided you would obey me because it makes you wet to submit, not because I know better than you or I never make mistakes.”

She was looking at him intently, the line between her brows disappearing.

“Could you do that?”

She nodded. “Yes, sir.”

He grinned at her use of the title.

“Can you believe I have your best interest at heart?”

She tilted her head to one side.

“Yes, sir.”

“I may not always be right,” he shrugged. “But I’m the one who gets to spank. Because ultimately that’s the way you like it.”

She looked relieved, her face softening. “When are you coming back?” she asked, her voice catching, her eyes tear-bright.

He shook his head. “I’m not sure. It could be a week, it could be a month. I’m sorry. But I should have more access to my computer now, so we can chat.

And you can tell me how obedient you've been."

She smiled and shifted her weight, her brows furrowing. "This really stings."

"I know. It's a punishment. It's going to sting for a few hours, just like I gave you a real spanking."

She blushed. "Ouch."

"Get your vibrator out of the drawer."

Her eyelids flickered and she complied.

"Now bend back over the bed, with the vibrator between your legs, right on your clit."

She took the position, her bottom now a bright red. "Is it on?" He laughed.

“Turn it on, Becca.”

He heard her muffled giggle.

“Make little circles right around your clit. Now reach back with your other hand and start pushing that plug in you again. That’s it. You’ve been a naughty girl, and now you’re getting spanked by me. Push the vibrator inside your pussy. All the way in, until it hits your cervix.”

He heard her groan, her back arching and contracting, her bottom wiggling. He returned to stroking himself. “Use that angled tip to get around behind your cervix, find your g-spot.”

He watched her fumbling with it,

sensing her confusion as she sought the location he described. “Ohhhh.”

“That’s it, baby. Push the butt plug hard.”

She complied, her movements becoming sloppy as her tempo increased. “Harder, Becca!”

She moaned.

“That’s it. I want you to come for me. Come for me now, Becca!”

A cry escaped her throat and her body froze, then she pushed with her toes on the floor, lifting her pelvis to bury the vibrator deeper inside her. She squeezed her butt around the plug, jerking as her orgasm crested and she made a keening cry. He rubbed his cock, meeting his own release at the sight of

hers.

* * *

Oh, shit. *The condom had slid off in the act. He froze and wondered if he ought to warn her. She might want to take the morning-after pill or something.*

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He didn't want to warn her, didn't want her to protect against a pregnancy.

Something had changed for him; something had woken up. She was so pure it made him ache. A woman who knew her life's purpose was to inspire teenagers to love literature; a woman

who laid not just her body but her soul bare to him. She was like a pre-arranged cue that woke him from a hypnotic trance.

There was good in the world and Becca embodied it.

If he was going to leave any part of himself on this earth, any legacy at all, he wanted it to be through her, and not through the political machinations of his government. So he was going to let fate roll this die for him.

* * *

It was another three weeks before Parker looked at her over dinner and announced, “My dad is coming home.”

“Home?” she asked, trying to keep the leap of strained excitement out of her voice. “You mean home to San Diego?”

“I mean home, here.”

She should correct him—this was not his dad’s home. Except maybe he sensed it truly was, the same way he sensed Zac was back. That thought sent a warm tingle across her chest. But no, Zac would never actually live with them, because he couldn’t. And didn’t that thought just dampen all the warmth that had just flared?

After cleaning up from dinner and helping Parker with his homework, she waited, itchy, for any sign of her...lover. Because that was all she could call him

—he certainly wasn't a partner, or a husband. What else could she call him? Her ghost?

It was not until Parker was in bed and she had just finished picking up the living room that she heard a thump in her bedroom. She smiled, her nipples tightening and her breath speeding up. She opened the door to her bedroom with an expectant bounce, but froze when she saw two men dressed in black engaged in combat.

If she'd had any breath, she would have screamed. She leaned against the door frame, gasping. They were moving quickly, in an intricate, silent dance. She could tell one was Zac, recognizing his lean frame, and the purposeful style from

when he'd fought—*killed*—her nanny. The second man had a black knit cap pulled low over his forehead and was stockier, slower. *What was he doing in her bedroom?*

Zac kicked the man in the gut and he doubled over, then lunged toward the floor, where a gun lay. Zac tackled him before he reached it, extending his own hand toward the weapon. When Becca realized neither could reach it, she leaped into action herself, snatching up the gun and pointing it at the intruder with shaking hands.

“Do not shoot that gun, Becca,” Zac ordered, the distraction costing him a blow to the face. She gasped as he

staggered backward, recovering just in time to dodge a second punch and throw his weight at the intruder's midsection again, knocking him to the floor again. He twisted out of Zac's grasp on his way down, and seized Zac's neck between his lower legs in a strangling hold.

Finding her breath at last, she held the gun trained on the man and gasped, "Let him go! Stand up and put your hands in the air!"

The man ignored her completely, but Zac had wrestled his way free and they both scrambled to their feet.

"Do not shoot! I repeat, do not shoot," Zac said without looking at her, concentrating instead on dodging the knuckles that were flying at his head.

“Why is my dad fighting...your dad?” Parker’s clear boyish voice rang out across the scuffle and the intruder froze, looking at Parker, then at Zac.

He never looked at her, but she knew with complete certainty, as if 17 years’ absence never happened, that he was her father. He ran for the window, jumping out in a surprising exit. Zac raced after him.

“Wait! Demo!” Zac climbed out the window. “Wait—you can see we have a mutual interest! Hang on—I just want to talk.” He cursed. “Fine. Find me,” he called out.

He shut and locked the window, turned and walked swiftly to her,

completely calm, completely confident. He took the gun out of her hand and folded her into his arms, pulling Parker into the hug at the same time.

“Nice work,” he said into her hair. “You were great.”

She hadn’t expected praise. He’d been so stern about not shooting she’d doubted her actions. But that made sense, didn’t it? He hadn’t wanted her to shoot her own father. Her knees buckled and she sagged against him, a sob caught in her throat.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he said. “I’m so sorry. I know it’s a shock.”

She drew back, out of his arms. “You knew!” she accused, tears fighting their way out. “You knew he was alive

and you didn't tell me.”

Zac looked genuinely pained. He leaned down and picked up Parker, holding him like a shield between them, reminding her to get it together or she'd scare their child. He looked like he wanted to say something, but his lips remained closed.

“Was that your dad?” Parker asked.

Her eyes filled with tears. “Yeah, Park. It was.”

“How about a glass of milk, buddy?”

“Yeah, okay. What song were you fighting to this time?”

“‘Stayin’ Alive.’ It has one hundred beats per minute, for when I need to fight

fast.”

Zac gave her a sympathetic look over his shoulder as he carried Parker out of the room, leaving her to muck through the betrayal and anger on her own.

Twenty minutes later, Parker was presumably back in bed when Zac joined her in the shower, neither of them speaking as he picked up the soap and began to lather her body. He was matter-of-fact about it, as if it was not a seduction, but more like a service. She stood docilely as he turned her around, shampooed her hair, his long fingers massaging her scalp with a reverence that surprised her. He nudged her back into the stream of water to rinse and

stepped out. When she turned off the water and opened the curtain, he was standing there with a towel outstretched, waiting to fold her into it.

She let him wrap it around her and she took the edges, holding them to her chest as she walked to the bed and sat down, staring at the carpet. “I’d guessed when you said it was a family member. Who else could it be?”

He sat next to her and put his warm hand on her back, infusing her with his strength.

“What did he do? Why are you after him?”

* * *

He was surprised at the pang he felt at her words. The same pang he'd felt when she'd accused him of knowing and not telling. Was it guilt? It was a new sensation.

“I’m not going after him, Becca. I’m personally involved and I don’t think I’m capable of keeping a clear head about any of this, anymore.”

She looked at him, her eyelashes clumped together with water from the shower, her skin still dewy. “What did he do?” she whispered.

He swallowed. “He sold state secrets. We’re not sure why. And as far as we can tell, he killed everyone he gave them to, so it may have just been

for the money, with no intention of actually harming his country. But he disappeared after that, so now there's an order on his head."

"Your orders are to kill him?" Her voice was hoarse.

He hesitated, then gave a slight nod. "But I don't plan to carry out those orders unless I absolutely have to."

"What would make you have to?"

He shrugged. "A kill-or-be-killed situation."

"What was this?" she asked drily, gesturing to her wrecked room with a sweep of her hand.

He grinned. "That was me trying not to get killed. He must have seen me entering through your window and

thought I was here to harm you. I can respect that.”

After a moment of silence, he touched her back. “Come on, let’s get you to bed, sweetheart.”

He tucked her in and wrapped his body around her soft form, holding her back against his front. “I think he’ll find me,” he said softly. “And maybe together we can fix the mess he’s in.”

He heard Becca sniff.

In the morning, Parker crept into the room and stood beside the bed. Zac rolled over to face the boy and put his finger to his lips as he crawled out of bed, so they didn’t wake Becca.

“Dad, did you send me a bike?”

Parker demanded.

“Yes, have you tried it out?”

“Well, Mom was going to take it to a bike shop to have it assembled.”

Assembled. Damn. Why hadn't he thought of that? Of course Becca wouldn't have the know-how or desire to put a bike together. Being a single mom held a multitude of challenges, not the least of which might be putting together the “some assembly required” presents. He felt like a total ass for not thinking of that.

“Show me where the box is, and I'll get it put together for you after breakfast, okay?”

“All right!” Parker exclaimed, racing down the hall to the laundry room

and reappeared dragging a box as big as he was.

He laughed. “Just leave it there and I’ll take care of it,” he said.

He made breakfast and brewed some coffee in Becca’s French press. She came padding down the hall, sniffing appreciatively.

“Mmm, that coffee smells divine.”

He poured a cup and served her. “Hungry for some French toast?”

“Absolutely.”

He handed her a plate. “I’m going to my place to get some tools, but I’ll be right back.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Are you going out the window or the front door?”

“Don’t get smart, missy, you know that won’t end well for you,” he teased. “Front door.”

“Oh, can I come?” Parker yelled, racing out of the living room.

“Nope. Sorry, bud.”

“I want to see your place. Is it upstairs?”

“No can do, buddy. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“When does that mean?” Parker wailed, sounding somewhat desperate. Guilt washed over him. This coming and going thing was not going to work. He was making their lives infinitely worse. He glanced at Becca to see her mouth set into a grim line.

“It means less than one hour, unless I get called into duty. And if that happens, I’ll come back to say goodbye, I promise. Okay?”

Parker hesitated, as if he weren’t sure whether he could trust him, but then he nodded solemnly. “Kay.”

He pulled a baseball cap low over his head and walked out the door, taking the stairs to his apartment on the top floor. In his apartment, he checked for communications on his laptop, then gathered some tools into a duffel bag. Picking up his cell, he called Marcus.

“What’s up?”

“El Demo showed. I’m not filing a report, so keep it under your hat until I

know more. He was watching Becca's place, and I entered through her window. I guess he thought she was in danger because he followed me in with intent to kill."

"Whoa," Marcus whistled. "You got a problem with doors?"

He grinned. "I liked the idea of showing up in her bedroom."

"Ugh—please. I don't want to hear about your sex life. So what happened?"

"So we fought a little and then Parker came in and called me 'Dad' and he realized his mistake and took off."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I told him to contact me. When or if he does, I guess I'll take it from there."

“Be careful.”

“Will do. I’ll keep you posted.”

When he returned to Becca’s place, Parker had dragged the box with the bike into the living room and emptied all the parts in a giant sprawl.

He’d often wondered what it would be like to be an ordinary person—to live the American dream, with the car in the garage and the wife and 2.5 kids. He thought he would go nuts. His profession was more than just money, or a means to avoid being killed. It was an addiction. He needed the adrenalin rush he got from combat, secret missions, and a variety of mortally dangerous situations. How would someone like him ever stop? No,

he'd always figured he would die on the job.

But the satisfaction he felt from the simple act of putting together a bike for his son surprised him.

“Okay, Parker, it’s all set. I just need to pump up the tires and you need to put the helmet on, and we can go try it out.”

“Yay!” Parker said, getting up and running to put on his shoes.

“Wanna come?” he asked Becca.

“You’re going out in public with him?”

He had already weighed the risks and decided it would be safe enough. “Yeah. You coming?”

She looked torn, like part of her

wanted to disapprove, but the other part didn't want to miss out. "Yeah, okay."

They took the elevator down and he threw Parker's bike in the back of his SUV, which she had since learned that he parked in different locations around their neighborhood, to avoid any detectible pattern. He drove to a gas station to fill the tires, and then to Balboa Park, where he unloaded the bike.

"He doesn't know how to ride yet, you know," Becca said in a tight voice.

"I'm going to teach him."

He could feel her anxiety level ratcheting up as she pulled out her inhaler and took a puff. He helped

Parker with his helmet and explained the basics of steering into the direction he was leaning. Parker kicked off enthusiastically, only to crash before he made one rotation of the pedals. Zac helped the boy back up and steadied the bike. “Okay, I’m going to hold the back of your seat while you get the feel for it, all right?”

Parker’s eyes had a worried look now. He gazed up at Zac as if for reassurance. He smiled. “You’re fine, you’re doing great.”

Parker pressed the pedals again and this time Zac held onto the back to keep it from dumping, jogging a little behind him as he kept the bike upright. When it seemed like he had the hang of it, he let

go.

Parker crashed.

Chapter Seven

“Jesus, Zac! Why did you let go of him?” she snapped, dashing forward. Parker was hurt, huddled on the sidewalk where he’d fallen.

Zac got there first and picked Parker up, placing him on his feet, instead of scooping him into his lap, as she would’ve done. “Let me see. Yep, you got a road rash. It happens, buddy. It’s part of learning how to ride.”

She bristled. “Okay, I think it’s enough for today.”

Zac looked up, a line of impatience between his brows. “The best way to learn is to get right back on,” he said to

both of them. He made a big show of examining Parker's knee again. "You're going to have a beautiful scab to show off at school tomorrow and you can tell your friends about how you learned to ride your bike. Come on, let's try it again."

Parker looked doubtful.

"He's had enough!"

Zac frowned at her over his shoulder. "I've got this, Becca."

The sharpness in his tone set her teeth on edge. Where did he get off? Parker was her kid—*her kid*. Zac had nothing to do with parenting him.

Six f-ing Father's Days I've had to make up to my kid for not having a man in his life. Now Zac shows up and

thinks because he made pancakes and bought him a bike, he gets to have a role in his life?

“No. He’s hurt, he needs to go home. We can try it again another day.”

Zac ignored her and turned to Parker. “You are super brave. Are you ready to give it another go, buddy?”

Parker nodded and threw his leg over the bike. Zac repeated his act of jogging along behind him, supporting the bike. When he let go, he remained jogging behind, tricking Parker into thinking he was still holding on. “That’s it, Parker, you’ve got it now!” he cheered.

Parker wobbled and she

instinctively shot forward, though of course she was too far away to catch him. His feet came off the pedals and he caught himself, prepared this time for the potential fall. Zac got him started again and he continued his tenuous wobbling and pedaling. Zac walked over to her, his face an unreadable mask.

Though it seemed he had been right, she was in no mood to forgive him. She scowled. He flicked an eyebrow and moved to stand behind her, wrapping an arm across her chest in a way that could be either threatening or affectionate, but was clearly an act of dominance. She tried to shrug him off, but the grasp tightened.

He put his lips close to her ear. “I

know you're pissed, and we'll talk about it when we get home."

The authority conveyed in his words created a flutter of fear and submission, overriding her defensive anger. He held her against his body as they both watched Parker learning to balance the bike, the look of pride at his continued success radiating brighter than the sun. She gradually relaxed and pressed herself back against Zac and he rewarded her with a kiss on the neck.

But anticipation of their "talk" turned her surly again on the ride home as she rehearsed her arguments. In the very back of her mind was the niggling fear she'd broken some domestic

discipline rule by arguing with him, but they'd never defined any rules or expectations for her. Still, she knew differences in opinion should be expressed respectfully. But fuck that—she wasn't even in a domestic discipline relationship—she didn't even have a real man. All she had was a ghost in this crazy, twisted “spy who loved me” situation. And she was certain Zac had no right to make the final decision for any parenting decision when it came to Parker.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” Ever observant, Parker picked up on her growing tension. She stalled, picking up her inhaler and taking a puff.

“Your mom’s pissed at me, but

we're going to work it out."

"Language, Zac!" she snapped with more venom than was necessary.

"Sorry. Your mom's mad at me. We're going to work it out."

How were they going to work it out? At that moment, this small issue seemed insurmountable. She could throw herself at this man sexually, but actually letting him into her life seemed to be an entirely different thing.

When they reached her apartment, Zac called Parker to him, sitting him in front of his laptop with a set of headphones to watch *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Her belly began to twist in knots as it became clear he was

soundproofing their son so they could “talk.”

She worked herself up, silently storming at him in her head when he beckoned her to the bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked at her expectantly.

She began to attack immediately. “You—you may *not* take risks with my son’s safety. Just because you live in constant danger and deal with pain on a daily basis does not mean he has to!”

Zac’s face remained perfectly smooth. She wanted to ripple it again—she wanted to see that small irritation she’d caused in the park. She wanted some kind of reaction out of him.

“Do you really think you can judge

what a kid can take? He's six years old! I mean, you're a man who—who—gets tortured!" She sounded like a spluttering fool, but she was too upset to speak intelligently. "I am his mother. I am the one who knows him. I have been the one in his life, kissing every boo-boo, holding him when he falls. Not you. Never you. So if you think you can insinuate yourself into head parent role just like that, you have another think coming!"

Zac nodded. "I get it, Becca," he said, placating her with the seriousness of his gaze. "You've been doing this on your own for a long time and you've done a damn good job. I'm sorry I

haven't been here. You don't trust me to make the right decisions for Parker. I understand." He reached out and grasped her waist, pulling her to stand between his legs. "I'm going to earn that trust from you," he said with the solemnity of an oath.

Her anger faded and she felt suddenly vulnerable, a trembling behind her knees making them wobble.

Zac stared for a moment, then he gave her hips a squeeze. "Bring me the wooden hairbrush."

Her eyes narrowed, defensiveness returning like lightening. "Why?" she demanded.

He stroked her hip. "It's not a punishment. But you and I need to

reconnect and this is how we're going to do it."

Her insides turned to liquid. She struggled to catch her breath.

"Breathe."

The command was soft. It reached right into her lungs and filled them, as if they really could obey him. He patted her butt to urge her to obey the first command, and she did, her heart beating an insistent rhythm in her ears and wrists. She'd bought the wooden hairbrush for spanking. Not that she'd had anyone to spank her, but she liked to smack it on her own ass now and again to imagine how it might feel. But she was more than a little afraid of it now.

She brought it to him and held it out, cursing her hand for shaking. Of course, there was no hiding anything from Zac. He wrapped both hands around hers, taking the brush and giving her a squeeze of reassurance.

“Pull down your pants.”

She took off her shorts, but left her panties on. Zac waited, tilting his head as he observed her. She wasn't trying to be defiant, she just suddenly felt overwhelmingly exposed and taking off her panties while he watched seemed more embarrassing than anything she'd already done in front of him. She felt her face flushing.

“Pull down your panties.” He

touched her thigh. “Breathing.”

Her lungs responded again, admitting a gulp of air as she peeled her panties down. *Down or off?*

“Right there,” he said, stopping her when they were mid-thigh, as if he sensed her question.

He guided her into position over his lap with her torso on the bed and began spanking her with his hand. It was not gentle or slow and she began to wriggle after only eight smacks, the delayed burn starting to set in. He caught the backs of her thighs, making her kick her feet. He smacked high on her cheeks, which she hated almost as much as the thighs. He pummeled the lower half of her buttocks like he had something to

prove. She began to whimper, not real crying, but a genuine expression of her discomfort. Was he ever going to stop? And where did he get off, anyway?

It didn't seem so. On and on he slapped until her cheeks grew almost numb. It seemed like an eternity before he stopped and rubbed.

“Becca, you gave me authority over you.”

She couldn't reel her thoughts from where they'd scattered to answer him.

“Is that still the kind of arrangement you want?”

He was rubbing her bottom, and the numbness was starting to dissipate, the fire returning. She felt like weeping,

though she wasn't sure why.

Yes. This was exactly the kind of arrangement she wanted. It made no sense logically, and parts of her were rebelling, but the tears behind her eyes were for something akin to grace. The grace of being turned over her man's knee, submitting completely, being held accountable and loved at the same time.

He picked up the wooden hairbrush and began to spank her with the same intensity and speed he had used with his hand. It was way too much. Panic flared and she squirmed wildly.

"Shh," he murmured. A gentle sound that didn't match the blistering he was inflicting on her woeful bottom.

She wailed in protest, even buried

her face in the covers and screamed, but he did not stop. She was not in control of her spanking.

“Is this still what you want?”

Why was he asking that at this moment? Part of her wanted to scream “No!” at the top of her lungs.

“Please?” she panted.

“Take your spanking,” he said softly, never relenting with his firm smacks, the wood making a popping sound as it connected with tender flesh.

“Do you trust me to be in charge of you?”

She felt a sob rise in her throat. She wanted to escape the pain, the urge to fight made her angry.

“How can I trust you when I never know when you’ll be around?” she shrieked.

He missed a beat of his regular rhythm, and when he picked it back up he was striking harder. “No. You cannot throw that at me every time you get mad. I said this was all I could do and you agreed to it.”

She wailed, tightening her bottom and stiffening up as if she might swim right off his lap and onto the bed. He showed no mercy, just continued spanking through her long wail and when she came out on the other side of it, she collapsed, all the fight leaving her, sobs and tears tumbling out into the covers.

She bawled as he lightened the intensity of the spansks, but not the speed, continuing to beat out a rhythm of dominance on her very sorry backside.

“I’m sorry,” she wailed.

* * *

“That’s it, baby.” He stopped spanking and rubbed Becca’s very well-punished bottom. Slightly swollen, it radiated heat and the lower half was a deep red, even purple in some areas.

She continued to weep and he stroked her nape, and down the length of her spine. He was careful not to try to comfort her tears away, but rather, to give her a safe space where she could

let them all out. When they stopped, she squirmed on his lap, probably just realizing she was still lying over it with her panties down.

“Is it over?”

He leaned over and kissed her bottom. “Yes, it’s over.”

“That really hurt.”

“I know.” He pulled up her panties and she hissed at the feel of them touching her tender backside. “Crawl up a bit.”

She crawled forward off his lap and sprawled on her belly, her face turned to the side to watch him. He rubbed her back, settling next to her.

“Are you mad at me?” she asked.

“No, I’m not mad.”

“You were mad, though. Out there, in the parking lot.”

One of the corners of his mouth lifted. “I was irritated,” he admitted.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were in charge and I’d better watch it or you’d take a hairbrush to my ass?”

He grinned. He had actually considered something along those lines, but didn’t think bullying her was going to make her back down. If she didn’t trust him, she didn’t trust him. He couldn’t force her into it by threat of a spanking. “Do you think that would’ve gone over?”

She hesitated, perhaps remembering how angry she’d been. “I

don't know."

"Well, honestly, I thought about it, but I decided pulling an 'I'm the boss' on a mama bear protecting her cub was liable to get me kicked out on my keister."

She smiled, a fresh tear leaking out of the corner of one eye. "Good thinking."

He thumbed away the tear. "What was that for?"

"You really do get me."

"Yeah." He stroked the hair back from her face. "Look, I know I haven't been around to parent Parker and you've been doing it all alone. And I understand you don't trust me to make the right decisions. But, like I said, I plan on

showing you I'm worthy of your trust. He's been missing a father in his life, and that's my fault. But I'm here now, and I'm going to do my job. And the way I see it, my job is to push him a little. Your job is to kiss his knee when he falls."

She blinked at him. He saw nothing of her earlier resistance to his words. Instead, she looked at him with the wide-eyed trust of a child, which he supposed was what is invoked in a submissive. It was quite possibly the most beautiful and energizing thing he'd ever seen. It made him feel as tall as a mountain. He knew he would give anything to live in the light of that gaze

for the rest of his life.

“You’re the boss,” she whispered.
“I’m sorry I didn’t trust you.”

He leaned over and kissed her temple, then her cheek. “Does that mean you trust me now?”

“Yes.”

“I spanked some trust into you?” he teased, running his hand lightly over the curve of her bottom.

“Well, I guess I figure anyone who knows how to handle me and my mixed messages—anyone who can make me submit when I have no intention of giving in, can probably teach a six-year-old to ride a bike.”

“Fear is debilitating to a kid. I think we should be cautious about instilling

unnecessary fears in Parker. And he pays attention to your cues, Becca. When you're afraid for him, he's afraid."

She frowned, but he could tell she was taking it in.

"Okay."

He continued to stroke her beautiful ass. She lifted it into his hand and hummed her appreciation.

"And you're right, it's not fair to blame you for a situation I agreed to."

A swell of love filled his heart, almost choking him. He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I think we can make this work, Becca. I don't know how, but I think we can. But, I want you to know, if you ever decide

you want a man who can be with you full time, just say the word, and I'll disappear."

She frowned. "Don't say that. You've done enough disappearing. I'll live with what you can give. You'll be my part-time Dom."

"I want to be your part-time husband," he said, surprised to find his heart had picked up speed. "I mean, not legally, because I don't exist...but I already think of you as my wife." He stopped, feeling less certain of himself than he ever remembered feeling.

Becca smiled at him, her eyes tear-bright. "Are you asking me to pretend marry you?"

He grinned. "Yes. Will you pretend

marry me, Becca?”

She giggled.

“I’ll get you a ring you won’t be able to wear. And we can do pretend vows in front of Parker, how’s that sound?”

Her lips trembled. “Perfect.”

“How about a ring that doesn’t look like a wedding ring? That you wear on another finger? Or wait—I know—maybe you’d rather have a slave collar.”

She gave him a laughing shove. “I do not want a slave collar. Well, actually, I *might* like a slave collar *in addition* to a non-wedding ring. I like black pearls.”

He grinned. “I will find you a

flawless black pearl and put it on a ring.”

She flushed. “It doesn’t need to be expensive.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll steal it,” he said, laughing when she looked up sharply to gauge his seriousness.

She laughed, too. “So, Zac, was that a punishment spanking, but you just didn’t call it that because I would’ve fought you?”

He chuckled. “Why label it? I gave you what you needed.”

She rolled to her side and leaned on one elbow. “But if you don’t give me rules and explain why I’m being punished, how will I ever avoid a spanking?”

“Does a naughty girl like you really want to avoid a spanking? You felt better about a reconnection than a punishment, and the results were probably better, right? You would’ve been pissed if it was a punishment and we’d probably still be arguing, even after your spanking.”

She stared at him, her lips parted, confusion pressing her eyebrows toward each other.

“So I’ll spank you when you need to be submissive, and you’ll work hard to please me, and we won’t have much need for punishment. Unless you pull another Lincoln Park stunt.”

She snuggled in closer to him. “I

won't. I'll be good."

"Of course you will," he said, kissing her hair. The vibration of his cell phone made him scowl. "Damn," he said, seeing it was Beatty. "I gotta go."

The disappointment on her face nearly killed him.

Chapter Eight

He wiped the sheen of sweat building on his forehead. He was not cut out for field work. He had never been able to get over his nerves. He was the type whose palms sweat so badly, his gun slipped in his grip. He checked his gun in its holster for the fourteenth time. Not that he planned to discharge it. He would make this quick and easy—grab the kid, point the gun at his head, and tell the mom to keep her mouth shut and get in the car. Easy as pie. *Yeah, right.*

He tried to push away the thought that they were as innocent as his own wife and daughters, whose lives he'd

been defending when he got into this mess eight years ago. He checked his watch: 7:45 am. They should be coming down any time now. The elevator dinged and he stood in the shadow, pulling his hat low over his eyes. The doors swooshed open. The kid was talking, telling some story to his mom. He shot forward and grabbed him around the waist, pointing the gun to his temple. “Not a sound or he gets shot,” he said, but he needn’t have worried. El Demo’s daughter couldn’t have screamed to save her life—she clutched her chest, gasping for breath.

He jabbed toward his car with the butt of the gun. “Get in that gray car there. Quick! Go!”

There was terror in her eyes, and she reached toward her son. Realizing she wasn't going anywhere without the kid, he led the kid to the car, so she would see they were all going together.

“*You*,” she gasped, the first sound she'd made. She'd recognized him. She knew his face from Lincoln Park, and from earlier when he'd posed as a marine to tell her Casper was dead.

He pushed her into the back seat and shoved the kid in behind her, pulling duct tape out of his pocket and making quick work of taping their mouths shut, wrists behind their backs, and ankles together. He shoved them down so they wouldn't be seen through the windows,

and ran around to jump in the driver side, just as Demo's daughter managed to open her door. He pointed the gun at the kid. "Don't try anything, or the kid dies. Got it?"

She stared at him with wild, frightened eyes.

"Got it?"

She nodded quickly, the eyes filling with tears.

"Good. Now get back down."

She hesitated, then laid back down on the seat.

"Don't move again or I'll make you sorry," he threatened.

He slammed the door shut, opened his and jumped in, starting the car. He backed out before she could try anything

else. His heart was pounding so hard he could almost hear it. He wiped his forehead with the back of his arm, his eyes darting to the rearview mirror, scanning all around for a tail.

They seemed safe.

He took them to an abandoned bungalow in Chula Vista, a musty, decrepit place, wood construction, perfect to blow up. Parking in the carport, he looked up and down the street. It appeared deserted. He only had to get them from the car door to the side door of the house—less than a yard—without being seen.

“Don’t move,” he barked, getting out. He walked around the car and

opened the back passenger door, pulling out a knife and cutting the tape around the kid's ankles. He repeated the action on Demo's daughter. "Okay, out of the car and into the house, now!" he ordered, indicating the way with his gun.

The boy scrambled out, his eyes down, but narrowed. The mother followed closely behind, clearly not allowing him out of her sight.

The house was strewn with litter and smelled musty.

"Sit down. There, against the wall." He pointed with the gun.

The two complied, the woman leaning her head against the wall, her chest moving up and down in tight little movements, as if she were struggling to

breathe. The boy rubbed his cheek on her shoulder, in a touching gesture of child comforting adult. Still keeping the gun trained on them, he pulled out his phone and thumbed to the camera application. “Say cheese,” he muttered and took a photo of their stricken faces, pale against the black duct tape. It was perfectly horror-inducing. If it didn’t make the nightly news, he’d be shocked.

“So, Rebecca...I heard your father paid you a visit?”

She made an angry grunt through the tape.

“Did you know he was still alive?”

She glared at the floor. He shut up—talking to her was a bad idea, anyway.

He was glad her mouth was taped, because he didn't want to think of her as anything other than the means to tie up a loose end that had been hanging over his head for eight years. He sat on the floor as well, still palming his gun as he pulled out his laptop, to which he uploaded the photo and attached it to the email he'd already drafted. Hitting send, it went out, fully encrypted, to every news station in town, the school where the woman worked, and the school her son attended. The only way their kidnapping wouldn't get reported and make the news would be if the FBI smothered it.

He unpacked the C4 plastic explosive he'd brought and set it up,

duct taping it to Rebecca's leg. Her nostrils pressed together with each breath, her struggle to breathe increasing.

“Keep very still, if you don't want to blow up yourself and the kid.”

* * *

The tape over her mouth made her panicky about breathing. She knew she was starting to hyperventilate, could feel Parker's wide, frightened eyes on her face.

Get a grip, Bec.

She leaned her head back against the wall and tried to find control.

Your lungs can obey me, too.

She groped for Zac's voice, his calm, commanding presence.

You have all the breath you need, your body can manage on what you're getting in and this asthma attack will pass, just like they all do.

She remembered his guidance that night he'd killed her nanny, sending her breath lower into her belly instead of struggling to expand her chest. She willed her exhale to lengthen and after five or six cycles, had control again. She opened her eyes and nodded at Parker, and saw relief there.

But what was going on? Had Zac's organization ordered this mission as a result of her father's visit? But that

would mean Zac had betrayed him, and he'd told her he wouldn't. But really, could she trust Zac at all? A man who killed for a living? Who'd already manipulated her life in so many ways? What was one more manipulation if it meant completing the mission he began the weekend they first met? A cold, sickening desperation swept over her.

But no. Zac may have turned her father in, but she couldn't believe he'd knowingly place her and Parker in danger. She was certain she could trust him that far. He loved her, or he believed he loved her, if a man like him was capable of such a thing. But she couldn't forgive him if he lied to her about her father.

She looked into the pasty, sweating face of their captor. She needed to calm herself and see what information she could get out of him.

“Mmm?” She made an inquiring sound through the tape, lifting her chin.

His eyes darted at her. He was nervous, that much was clear.

She repeated the noise and the lift of the chin.

“What?” he asked, but did not remove her tape. “Do you want your inhaler?”

That surprised her. He knew about her inhaler and had already considered it. She nodded eagerly. She did want her inhaler, but more important, he’d have to

remove her tape to give it to her.

He pointed the gun at her, menacingly. "If you move, both of you will be blown to bits, got it?"

She nodded rapidly.

He walked out the door they'd come in and she heard the car door open and shut, and he returned with her purse. He watched her suspiciously as he fished through it. She kept her face relaxed, trying to look as innocent as she could muster. He produced the inhaler and set her purse by the door as if he were concerned she might make a grab for it, advancing slowly, gun still pointed at her face.

Parker was already taking his cue from her, relaxing his face. Their captor

gripped the corner of the duct tape over her mouth and pulled, eliciting an involuntary screech when it separated from her skin.

He shoved the inhaler between her teeth and dispensed it before she could say a word.

“Thank you!” she gasped the moment he withdrew it. “Wait!” She turned her face away to keep him from refastening the tape.

He pressed the butt of the gun against her cheek.

“May I use the bathroom?” she asked in her meekest voice.

He remained unmoving, the gun pressed into her cheek for a long

moment. Then he sighed and pulled out a knife, using it to slice the bomb from her leg and the tape from her ankles.

“There’s a bathroom in there, but I don’t think it works.” He pointed the gun at Parker’s head. “You’ve got twenty seconds to return or I pull the trigger.”

“Wait—my hands? I can’t pull my pants down otherwise.”

His eyes narrowed.

She nodded at Parker. “You think I’m going to take any risks with his life?”

He seemed to agree with that logic and cut her hands free.

Her heart slamming in her throat, she ran in the direction he indicated and found the bathroom, which had a little

water sitting in the bowl. She did have to go, but more important, she wanted to buy time, to look around, maybe get him to talk. She used the toilet in record time and raced to return.

“What about him?” she asked.

“What?”

“Do you have to go, too, Parker?”

Parker nodded.

She looked appealingly at their captor. He rolled his eyes. “Turn around,” he ordered.

She turned around and willingly placed her wrists behind her back so he could re-tape them. “Is it my dad or Zac you’re luring in?”

“Shut up,” he snapped. “No

questions.”

She sucked in her breath, trying to keep it even and slow. Sitting back down without being asked, she nudged Parker to stand. Their kidnapper cut Parker’s wrists free and pointed the gun at her head. “Twenty seconds or your mom dies.”

Parker took off for the bathroom.

“What if no one comes for us?”

The man wiped sweat from his forehead and considered her. “He’ll come.”

“And then what?”

“I said shut up!” he flared, grabbing the tape and ripping off a piece to slap over her mouth. She was disappointed, but at least knew a tiny bit more than she

had to begin with. Parker raced back in and despite his pale face, there was excitement bubbling underneath his fear—as if he'd enjoyed the challenge of peeing in less than twenty seconds when his mom's life was in danger. With a stab, she realized he probably took after his father in that. She prayed he'd find a safer outlet for his thrills than Zac had.

Zac.

The thought of him made her heart grow warm and contract at the same time. Would he come for them? Would her father?

Their captor taped the bomb to her leg once more. She noticed he was not overly careful in handling it, causing her

to doubt his threat that her movement would set it off. It had a detonator; that was what she needed to beware.

* * *

He'd just deplaned in Serbia, where he'd been sent to make a hit, when he had the powerful sensation something was wrong. Something with Becca. And with Parker.

He picked his bag up off the luggage cart and stood in the noisy airport, considering. How wrong could things be? His every instinct told him to turn around and get back on a plane without delay. But skipping out on a mission was serious enough to be

considered treachery. And he had nothing to go on. He looked around, his eye catching the man who must be his local contact.

Shit.

He walked forward and greeted the man as if they knew one another, playing the designated cover role. He was taken to a hotel, provided with several guns and the information he needed to complete the job. He connected his laptop to satellite and opened it, firing up the security cameras at Becca's. Nothing there. He looked at his watch. It was 5 pm in Belgrade, which meant it was 8 am in San Diego. They should be on their way to school. He called her cell phone. No answer.

The sense of urgency was in his body, a danger perceived in his cells despite the lack of evidence. He checked flights back to the States and booked one for later that night. The hit was planned to happen during a public parade the following day, but maybe he could somehow make it happen before the flight. He slipped on his Kevlar vest, holstered the pistol, and left the hotel to survey the security around the designated victim's house.

It was a fortress, and getting into the compound would require weeks of preparation. No, the parade had been the best option. But that was too bad. He wouldn't be there for it.

When he got back to the hotel room, he called Becca's work.

The secretary's voice sounded strained when he asked for Becca. "Who is calling?" she asked suspiciously, cuing his warning alarms.

"Thomas Mulberry. Is she in?"

"I'm sorry, I cannot give that information out," she said tightly, and he was certain something was amiss.

He called Marcus. "Hey. Ah... listen, can you do me a favor?"

"What is it?" Marcus sounded tense. He blew out his breath. He hoped his instincts weren't wrong.

"Can you locate Becca and Parker for me?"

“Why?” Marcus’s voice was sharp.

“Ah, I just need confirmation of their location.”

“Do you know where El Demo is?”

“No. Can you do it?”

“Okay, sure. But you’ll owe me.”

“You know I always take care of you.”

The phone disconnected.

He tapped the table. Well, there was nothing else he could do but get on that plane and figure things out when he got there.

Ten minutes later the phone rang next. “What’ve you got?”

“Check your mail and call me back.”

“Thanks.”

He opened the laptop. Marcus had forwarded a photo that sent adrenalin pumping through his body. Becca and Parker were bound and gagged with duct tape, looking terrified. His balls tightened, as they always did in a life or death situation. He opened and closed his fist, dialing Marcus.

“What the fuck?”

“It’s all over the news, they’re missing. The photo was sent to the news stations.”

“Beatty?”

“I think it’s El Demo. Check this out.”

Another email popped into his

mailbox.

“What is this?”

“Flight reservations for two adults, one child to the Canary Islands. I’m tracing the names to issued passports, but it could fit. How much do you want to bet those two are supposedly killed by a bomb and never seen again?”

“You think he’s going to fake their deaths?”

“It fits, don’t you think?”

It made sense logically, but Zac’s gut told him it wasn’t true. Why would El Demo need to fake their deaths when he already knew Zac was looking after them? Unless he didn’t trust Zac, which was possible. He ground his teeth.

“I will keep looking here and I’ll

send you the passport info as soon as I can hack in to get it—probably in the next hour.”

Zac hung up without a word. Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong about all of this. He paced about the hotel room. He threw a chair. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to focus. He'd never ghosted at will before, but maybe in this instance he could. Maybe because Parker needed him. He used every ounce of will to clear his mind and try to leave his body. But the sense of urgency pressuring him to succeed was exactly what kept him from finding any buoyancy to his consciousness. He kept at it, trying

to recapture the desire to leave his body that had driven him out of it in the past.

No luck.

His phone rang in what seemed like just a few minutes, but had actually been over an hour. “I have the passports—it’s definitely them. I sent them to you.”

Zac opened Marcus’s email and stared at the passport photos and aliases of Becca, Parker, and El Demo.

“Their flight’s scheduled for this evening. Should I let Beatty know?”

“No,” he barked. “Don’t do anything. Please.”

“Can you get to the Canary Islands from where you are now?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Thanks.” He hung up and packed his bag, leaving the gun

and vest hidden behind a wall board of the hotel. He didn't notify his local contact of the change in plans; he simply checked out and headed for the airport.

Fourteen hours later he arrived at San Diego International ready to crawl out of his skin, he was so wound up. The Canary Island tickets were a ruse, he was sure. Even though he hadn't been successful in somehow connecting telepathically with Parker, he'd felt mounting distress from him the entire agonizing plane ride. Becca and Parker were in danger, serious danger and he was going to find them.

He drove to his apartment, holstering two guns he kept in his car.

Outside his apartment door, the hairs on his scalp stood on end.

Someone was in there.

He drew the Glock 27 he'd taken from his car and unlocked the door as quietly as possible. He was careful, standing behind walls for protection as he advanced silently through his place. Hearing the clicking of a keyboard, he crept to his office, then swung around the entryway, pointing the .40-caliber pistol directly at the head of the intruder, who at the same time, whirled and aimed a gun at him.

El Demo. His eyes were alert in a worn, expressionless face.

Zac paused only a second before he lowered his gun. Demo was not there to

kill him. If he were, he wouldn't do it sitting at his desk.

He was there for intel.

“You think I'd keep anything on my computer?”

“I need the location of Marcus Smith.”

Zac felt a rushing in his head as the puzzle rearranged itself and clicked together in his head.

El Demo was after Marcus Smith.

Marcus's intel about the Canary Islands hadn't made sense because he'd been misdirecting. Was it on Beatty's orders? A dangerous determination sharpened within him.

“Home address?”

“No, current location. I need your password to the system.”

He hesitated. Maybe it wasn't Marcus misdirecting. Maybe El Demo needed to get his hands on more secrets to sell. Would he kidnap his own daughter and grandson to achieve those ends? He wouldn't put it past him. Zac doubted he'd go so far as hurt them, but this could be a grand manipulation to make him believe they were on the same side.

Demo held up his hands, palms out. “I don't need to see it. You can drive—but there's a way to trace his phone to his exact location.”

“I don't have clearance to trace the

chips they put in our equipment.”

“It’s not the chips. Every agent has the ability to trace calls.”

Ah, a call trace. He shook his head. “He never stays on the line long enough.”

“You’ll call him, and then I’ll call him while he’s on the phone with you, so he never disconnects.”

“You have his number?” he asked suspiciously.

Demo’s lips curled in a wry smile that looked more like a grimace. “He left his calling card with every photo,” he said, pointing at a printout of the photo of Becca and Parker, with the words, “If you have any information, please call” followed by a phone number.

Zac nodded once. “Stand up and turn around. Put your hands on top of your head.”

Demo complied slowly so Zac could track his movement. Keeping one eye on Demo, he logged into the system.

“I’m in, you can turn around.”

“You’ll log in one more time to the tracking page under data systems analysis,” Demo said, without turning around.

Zac navigated, hoping nothing had changed in the eight years since Demo went AWOL. He did find a tracking page, which asked for his login. He repeated the process. “I’m in.”

Demo turned around. “All right,

you have his cell number, right? You're going to plug it into that box there."

"It's fully encrypted, you know."

"Of course I know," Demo snapped.

Zac entered the number. "Okay, hit the 'find GPS location' button. Now all we need is for him to use that phone, and we've got him. I'll call first."

Demo dialed the number on the paper, which didn't match the number Zac had for Marcus, but his number activated on the screen when he answered.

Chapter Nine

“Tips hotline.” Marcus was sitting in the window of the house across the street from the one where he left his prisoners and the bomb. He’d spent the night in there to watch them, but moved here at first light. This was a safer place for him, plus, the more he had to take care of their basic needs of food, water, and bathroom, the harder it was going to be to live with their deaths. The less contact, the better. It was going to be hard enough to press the detonator as it was, but it had to be done.

“What do you want?” The unmistakable sound of El Demo’s deep

growl rang in his ear. Bingo.

“You.”

“Fine. Let them go and you can have me.”

His heart pounded, but he made his voice sound cool. “2204 Via Encantada. One hour.”

“No,” Demo growled.

“No?” he spluttered.

“I’m not showing up till you let them go.”

Another call was flashing in—his buddy Casper the Ghost. If he could just keep him out of the country, he could pull this off.

“You’re not in a position to negotiate,” he snapped to El Demo and disconnected the call, transferring over

to Casper.

“Anything new for me?”

“Nada. You in the Canary Islands?”

“Yes, and they’re not here.”

He swallowed. Did he sound accusatory? “You sure?”

“Not one hundred percent. Did you verify if they got on the plane?”

“No, you told me to do nothing.”

“Right. True enough. Can you check the records to see if anyone used those tickets?”

“Sure thing. I’ll do it right now.”

“Thanks. Keep me posted.”

He exhaled. Zac would stay out of the way and it would all be over in one more hour. “Will do.”

After eight years living in fear that Demo would resurface and the truth would come out, he could put it all to rest. His wife and daughters could leave the safe house he'd placed them in yesterday, and he could forget the paranoia that had wracked him ever since he'd traded state secrets for the safe return of his family. Demo had helped him—had given him the idea of providing information on closed missions. Then Demo had provided cleanup once his family was safe and had killed the group responsible. Black Ops higher-ups had never known Marcus had been compromised in any way—the kidnapping and rescue remained a secret

between him and Demo.

He'd never intended for Demo to take the fall for it, but when the wind blew that way, fear for his own life made him duck his head and allow Demo to fend for himself. Demo had obliged by simply disappearing, solidifying suspicion against him. The only wrinkle had been his return.

He blinked at the house. He thought he'd seen movement there. It was possible—make that highly likely—El Demo would enter the house from the rear, but he'd set up his position so that he had a clear view of Rebecca and her kid, so if he saw movement there, all he had to do was hit the detonator. Bombs were El Demo's specialty, so the story

he was fabricating—that Demo had faked the death of his daughter and grandson and escaped with them to the Canary Islands—would be plausible.

The creak of a floorboard made him jump, his grip tightening on the detonator, the pistol in his other hand pointed to the door behind him. The possibility of El Demo finding him here had not entered his mind. He needed him to be in that building when he hit the detonator.

Another creak made him whirl, and catching a flash of movement in the doorway behind him, he fired, clutching the detonator as he sprinted toward the relative safety of the wall near the door.

“I’m holding the detonator to the bomb strapped to your daughter’s leg! Come out slowly with your hands in the air or I’ll blow her and the kid sky high.”

Nothing but silence greeted him for a moment, then he heard Demo’s voice. “You don’t want to do that, Marcus. You’re not a killer.”

Irritation flamed through him. He fired into the doorway to show he meant business. “You have to the count of five. One, two, three, four...”

“All right,” Demo rumbled. “I’m coming out.”

He looked ancient—the lines on his face had deepened to valleys and his

eyes were dead. He advanced slowly with his hands in the air. “Open your jacket. Slowly.”

Demo opened his jacket, revealing five guns strapped to his torso.

“Put them on the floor, one at a time.”

The sound of footsteps made them both turn, and he saw Demo draw his gun. His own gun was already pointed toward the doorway, but Demo’s move spurred a convulsive reaction in his other hand, and he squeezed the detonator to the bomb.

“*No!*” Demo yelled as the deafening explosion sounded and Beatty rounded the corner, gun drawn and pointed at Demo.

Marcus could not hear the gunshot, but he saw Demo's finger pull the trigger of the gun pointed squarely at his head. His instinct to duck came too late. Even before the bullet struck him between the eyes, Marcus knew he was a dead man.

* * *

Crushed beneath Zac's body, Becca clung to Parker in the stiff grass where they'd all been thrown to the ground. Zac's arm was wrapped protectively over her head. She couldn't hear anything—the sound of the explosion still rang in her ears as Zac dragged them to stand, hustling them away from the burning house where they'd spent the

longest, most terrifying day and night of their lives.

He'd arrived several minutes before and had cut her free of the bomb and thrown it into another room of the house, causing her to flinch in panic.

"It's all right," he said calmly as he slit through the tape on her wrists and ankles. "It's a C4 explosive; it won't go off until the detonator's hit." He repeated the action on Parker's bonds, then pulled them to their feet. "Can you walk? We need to get out of here as quickly as possible."

She had nodded, though her knees had buckled and he had to support her as they ran out. The bomb had exploded just seconds after they'd emerged from

the house. Their backs had been pelted with debris, which was still raining down on them.

Zac drew a gun and moved with a feline stealth, shielding both her and Parker's bodies with his own as he corralled them alongside a house, then across the street. "Stay here," he mouthed, or maybe he said it and she just couldn't hear him. He crept up the stairs of the house. He was saying something again. She looked at his lips to decipher his words. "Hide in the bushes there. I'll be back for you."

She turned to comply and then realized Parker had slipped past her and followed his father in. *Shit*. She, too,

crept inside the house. Zac turned briefly and took in their presence, then continued on.

“Don’t shoot.” His voice sounded muffled from the ringing in her ears, but even so, she could hear the perfect calm in it.

“I already did, but he’s wearing Kevlar.” The voice that answered was equally unemotional.

She sucked in her breath. Their captor lay dead in a pool of blood and next to him lay her father, who was bleeding from his ear, but still alive. Zac’s boss was standing over him with a gun pointed at his head.

She pushed past Zac and dropped to her knees next to her father, picking up

his hand and holding it her lap.

“Lower your gun.” There was a threat in Zac’s voice that time and she looked up to see his gun pointing at his boss.

Surprisingly, the boss complied, though he didn’t holster it. “Disarm him,” he ordered Zac.

Zac crouched beside her and removed the guns strapped to her father’s torso. Parker appeared on the other side of her father and touched his shoulder. He turned to gaze at his grandson. “Hello, Parker,” he said, as if they were being introduced.

“Hi,” Parker shouted, because he couldn’t hear well. “Are you going to

die?”

Her father shook his head. “No.” He lifted his shirt to reveal his Kevlar vest. “Not this time.” His gaze swiveled to the boss, as if challenging him to disagree.

The flash of lights alerted her to the arrival of the fire trucks and only then did she detect their sirens through the ringing in her ears.

“In my car, all of you,” the boss barked, flicking open his phone and dialing a number. “I need cleanup immediately,” he said into the receiver, giving the address as he shepherded them out a side door and holstered his gun. “We’re FBI,” he said to Zac, and the two of them pulled out FBI

identification badges, which they showed to the police as they made their way through. Ninety minutes later they were all sitting in Becca's living room, giving Beatty, the boss, each of their stories. Zac had Parker on his lap and an arm around her waist. Her father pressed a washcloth to his ear, which had been shot, but was apparently nothing more than a flesh wound. The ringing was still present in her ears, but she could hear over the background noise, if she concentrated. It was like listening to someone in a crowded restaurant.

Her father's story moved her to tears—his crimes were not as horrible as her imagination had created if he was

to be believed. He'd committed them only to help Marcus recover his kidnapped family.

"And then you disappeared—why?"

Her father shrugged. "I was ready to be done with all of it, anyway. I'd already been forced to give up my family. I was tired of it. I didn't mind taking the fall for Marcus and disappearing."

"Why was the Dark Angel out for you?" Zac asked. When she looked puzzled, he explained, "The nanny."

"I killed her partner when they stiffed me on a private job."

Becca felt sickened by the idea of her father as a hitman. But then, Zac was

too, wasn't he? He just did it for his country.

Beatty considered her father with a shrewd expression. "I can remove the order on your head, but you'll still stand trial for treason."

Becca's mouth went dry. It didn't seem right she should discover her father was alive, only to lose him so quickly to imprisonment.

"However, if you happen to escape while under Agent Casper's watch, I can't help that, and I don't have resources to hunt you."

His flinty eyes turned to Zac. "I tracked you today to find out why you walked off your mission. I thought we'd

discussed this unapproved relationship.”

Zac’s gaze was equally cold. “I want Marcus’s job.”

Beatty raised an eyebrow. “Negative. You are one of our best weapons. Your position is not negotiable.”

“Bullshit.”

Silence stretched between them as they eyed each other like two wolves fighting for the alpha position.

“You think I can’t ghost out as easily as he did?” he asked, jerking his thumb at her father.

“With a wife and kid?”

Becca felt a strange surge of pleasure at being called Zac’s wife and the thought of going on the run with him

was more exciting than she cared to admit.

“Wouldn’t you rather know where I am and what I’m up to? Have me working for you, instead of someone else?”

“The organization has made a significant investment in you. You’re too valuable as a field agent to give up.”

“You’ll lose me either way. At least this way, you’ll still have me on your side.”

A muscle jumped in Beatty’s neck as the two men eyed each other. Becca held her breath.

“Finish the job you fucked up in Serbia.”

Zac nodded, once.

Another silence.

“You’ll be bored to death as an analyst.”

Becca sat up taller. Had he just conceded?

Zac gave her a sidelong glance and winked. “I’ll find other things to occupy me.”

Beatty fixed his dark gaze on her father. “I can’t hire you back,” he said, surprising them all with the news that he’d just considered it. “But I’d probably never think of looking for you right here in San Diego.”

Becca smiled. “Thank you, sir.”

He looked at her, his face a stony

mask, and made her laugh when he, too, winked.

* * *

Becca looked radiant in her strapless wedding gown, hair falling in soft waves down her back, a wreath of white and peach roses on her crown. Parker wore a beige linen suit that matched Zac's, with the pants cuffed so they didn't catch sand. They stood on Silver Stand State Beach in the presence of Becca's parents, who were on tenuous but increasingly warm terms with each other, Becca's sister and her sister's husband, and a justice of the peace.

“Friends, we have been invited here today to share with Zachary Casper and Rebecca Cavanah a very important moment in their lives. They have decided to live their lives together as husband and wife. They have written their own vows, which they will now share with each other. Zac?”

He swallowed and pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, surprised to see that fingers normally steady enough to pick the tiniest lock, or disarm the wiring on a bomb, shook slightly. Though he'd spent a lifetime rejecting emotion, he relished the feeling now—the overwhelming love healing him as it coursed through his body in waves. He

took a deep breath, hoping his voice would be steady.

“Becca, until I met you, life wasn’t real to me. I was like the walking dead. You woke me up.” He grinned, looking up from his paper to meet her eye, “I guess I was Sleeping Beauty, and you were the huntsman. Your kiss brought me back to life.”

She smiled back at him, tenderness etched in her face.

He glanced back at his sheet. “Thirty-five years never prepared me for the power of your love. I didn’t know my purpose in life until I met you—and now I’m sure. It’s to be your man, your husband. Today I commit to that role, knowing it is the finest honor of my life.

There can be no greater privilege than to hold you in my arms, or sleep beside you at night. You've already given me the greatest gift possible in the form of our son, Parker, and I promise you, I will be the best father I can be to him, and to the rest of our children, if we should have more."

He winked at Parker, who beamed with surprised delight.

"I love you. I dedicate my whole life's journey to loving you, no matter what path it may take. I give you my heart, my body, my soul. I'll be your man, forever."

He gave her a solemn nod, reaching his hand out and she placed her palm in

his, smiling and blinking back tears.

“Becca, you may now read your vows,” the officiant instructed.

Her sister handed her a piece of paper on which he could see her neat, loopy scrawl. “Zac, no one has ever understood me the way you do. I don’t think I even understand myself as well as you do.” She looked up and gave him a watery smile. “I am so grateful for your presence in my life and to have you—” she broke off, her voice choking with emotion, “—for real, for keeps, is a dream come true. I feel cherished when I’m with you and I know you would do anything for me. Already you’ve helped me grow and release my fears. I look forward to following your lead and

discovering who I really am and who I can be.” She’d peeked at him when she said “following your lead”—acknowledging their own private meaning to the phrase.

His heart swelled even further.

“Do you have a ring for the bride?”

“I do,” he said, pulling out the giant black Sea of Cortez pearl he’d had made into a ring.

Her eyes shone as he placed it on her finger, repeating the vows the officiant offered.

“Becca, do you have a ring for Zac?”

Becca took the ring from her sister, but her fingers trembled so badly, she

dropped it into the sand. Everyone laughed as Parker scrambled to snatch it up.

“Here, Mom,” he said with a grin.

“Thanks, baby,” she said, ruffling his hair.

She placed the ring on Zac’s finger, repeating the vows.

“By the power vested in me by the State of California, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss each other.”

Zac cupped Becca’s face and lowered his lips to meet hers, which parted in welcome, her hands coming to rest on his chest. Feeling the eyes of her family upon them, he pulled away, but instantly missed the contact, and pulled

her back in for a lingering kiss, causing their guests to laugh. When he reluctantly broke away, he leaned down and picked up Parker, kissing one cheek at the same time as Becca kissed the other.

“Look!” Parker yelled, pointing out to the ocean. A pod of dolphins were flashing their graceful arcs, just a few hundred feet from shore.

Becca caught her breath, and he put his arm around her waist, as they all stood watching the magic together.

Epilogue

Six months later

Zac lifted her off his knee and turned her to sit on his lap, looking into her face. She set her jaw in defiance, refusing to allow the tears stinging her eyes to escape. As always, his face was an inscrutable mask, but she thought she heard a slight sigh as he tilted her torso back down to the bed, and rolled her back over.

Her panties were around her thighs, her bare ass glowing from the long hand spanking he'd just given her. They had quarreled over Kung Fu lessons for

Parker. Or rather, she had quarreled while he remained steadfastly calm. His calm had irritated her, and she'd ended up stomping around the house like a child, slamming cabinets and finally, the bedroom door.

Which had earned her this spanking.

She tensed, listening to detect what implement Zac selected. The sound wasn't a clue, but the loud slap of the leather tawse struck a jolt of fear into her. She clenched her buttocks and surged forward, as if she might squirm right off his lap. He held her easily with an arm around her waist and brought the tawse down across her cheeks again. She gasped with the pain of it.

“Ow!” she complained.

He ignored her and brought it down again, this time on her right cheek, the next on her left. Then he caught the backs of her thighs, which flooded her with rage. She kicked her feet and howled. “Owwwwww!”

He paused for a moment to let her settle, but didn’t say a word. The entire warm-up with his hand had been silent, as well. They both knew why she was being spanked and that she wasn’t ready to talk.

She caught her breath, a much easier feat these days. She hadn’t had an asthma attack since they’d married as a result of Zac’s patient tutelage of stress

relief techniques.

The tawse bit into her flesh again, just as the second wave of pain from the stripes kicked in. She bucked on his lap. Another lash. As the cruel leather instrument stung her flinching ass again and again, she squeezed her eyes closed and grit her teeth. She was sweating with the endurance, fighting the sensations, fighting Zac in a silent, futile battle of wills.

As the pain was met in equal measure by endorphins, her panic receded, and with it her resistance, until her natural submission began to surface. She tried to hold onto her anger, but as he continued to stripe her raw cheeks, it became impossible to keep. She lost her

focus, forgot why she was angry as all sensation exploded into the pain of his punishment and the helplessness of her situation. Nothing she could do or say would stop the spanking before Zac decided it was over.

The first sob came out quickly, like a bark, and then she knew nothing but the sensation of the leather biting her skin five more times before the second sob overtook her.

“No more,” she sobbed. “No more.”

He gave her exactly three more, harder than the rest and then stopped, the pliant strap resting across the cleft of her cheeks.

“Sorry,” she croaked.

He slid the heel of his hand inside her shirt, stroking up the length of her back. The gesture completed her surrender, and she sank into the bed, into his touch, weeping with the release of it all.

“Sorry.”

He removed the threat of the strap from her bottom and pulled up her panties, then rolled her up to cradle in his arms.

“I’m still mad at you,” she wept, pouting like a child.

He leaned his forehead against hers, rocking her gently. “Okay,” he said.

Okay. It was so easy for him to accept her emotions without any triggered response of his own. Sometimes it infuriated her, but she saw the blessing of it.

“Why is it every time we fight, *I* end up getting spanked?” she sulked, sniffing.

The corners of his mouth turned up as he gazed at her tenderly. “Because that’s the way we do things.”

“I still don’t think you’re right.”

Zac’s insistence on switching Parker to a more serious studio, where he’d take lessons three times a week, had upset her. As much as she adored Zac, she didn’t want their son to grow up

to be like him.

“I didn’t spank you because I’m right,” he said mildly.

Some of the remaining resistance in her fell away. “Why did you spank me?” she asked, expecting an answer about her temper tantrum, or disrespect.

“Because it calms you down so we can talk.”

She ran her tongue over her dry lips. “You’re thirsty,” he said. “Go get your water bottle.” He helped her to her feet and patted her ass as she left to cross the room for her drink. She drank several gulps as she returned and stopped in front of him, feeling suddenly shyer than a unicorn.

“Baby.” He reached an arm around

her waist and pulled her onto his lap, her sore bottom stinging at the friction of movement over his khakis.

“I don’t spank you because I know better, or because I’m right. I spank you because you need it.”

Her last defense flew away and she crumbled into another wet mess of tears. He was right, she did need it. It helped her release her frustrated emotions, broke down her defenses, and opened her heart. He pulled her against his shoulder and rocked her, rubbing her back. “I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you, too,” she sniffed. She buried her face against his neck until she’d recovered. When she lifted her

head, Zac nudged her off his lap.

“Go stand in the corner with your panties down.”

“Wh-what?”

“You heard me.”

She stood, her legs still trembling from the spanking, and obeyed, putting her nose in the corner and pulling her panties back down. “This is a punishment.”

“It is,” she heard Zac’s silky voice approaching her from behind. “But I’m not doing it to punish you.”

“Why are you doing it?”

His arms wrapped around her and one hand slid down her belly in the direction of her pussy, which was dripping with moisture.

“Why do you think?”

She hid a smile, though he wouldn't have seen it anyway.

His finger slid over her wet and swollen sex. “You’ve been a naughty girl, and naughty girls get corner time. With their bare, punished bottoms on display.” His other hand caressed her tender butt cheeks. “You know what I like to do with a punished bottom?”

“What?” she whispered.

“I like to fuck it. Would you like that, Becca?”

She couldn't answer, wanting it, but not wanting to ruin the punishment feel of his threat by admitting she wanted it. Or to admit to him she was a little

afraid, though he probably already knew.

“Go bend over the bed,” he murmured, pulling her panties all the way off.

“Yes, sir.” Heart thumping, she folded her torso over the side of the bed, presenting her ass to him. She listened to his movements as he opened and closed the nightstand drawer and then gasped when he peppered her bottom with a flurry of spanks. They hurt worse after the corner time break, as if her flesh had had a chance to register just how sore it really was. “Ow! Please, Zac!”

“No, Becca,” came his silky reply in her ear. “You’ve been a naughty girl so I have to be very, very strict with you.”

The words “naughty” and “strict” wound her up, and she gave a soft moan, just as she felt the cool application of lube on her back hole. Zac rubbed the rounded tip of a butt plug in her pussy, wetting it with her juices.

“Do you want me to punish your asshole?” he asked softly.

She moaned and he pushed the slickened plug against her resisting entryway.

“Open for me,” he commanded, and her body obeyed at once, the muscles of her pelvic floor relaxing, her pussy spasming and her tight sphincter spreading wide to allow the plug to slip in. It filled her, but there was no pain.

Rather, it created a sense of urgency, making her desperate to come. Her legs shuddered as his fingers slid inside her and he pressed the plug deeper.

“Oh, God...”

“Yes, you’ve been a bad girl, Becca, and bad girls get punished.” He shoved the plug as deep as it would go with little pulses, fucking her with it. She made a keening sort of sound in the back of her throat.

“Please?”

“Please what? Please fuck my ass?”

He continued to push the plug in as his fingers plunged in her slick depths. She couldn’t answer. She was nearly delirious with need, her mind already

exploded into a non-verbal consciousness.

“Yes, I’m going to teach you to be a good girl, Becca. Can you be my good girl?”

“Yes!” she gasped urgently.

“What will you do for me?”

“Anything!” The vague idea of serving him like a slave flashed through her mind, crawling on her knees, or being ordered to suck his cock, and a small orgasm ripped through her, though with the plug in her ass, she couldn’t tighten her pelvic floor the way she normally did.

He slid his cock into her pussy, and the sense of being too full, with the

double penetration of the plug and his cock made her sob with need. He pumped into her, pushing the plug in deeply each time he filled her until the combined sensation of cock and plug had her clawing the bedcovers, offering soft sobs of desire. She felt his own desire growing as he increased his tempo and intensity, but just before she shattered, he pulled out, nearly making her weep. He removed the butt plug and pressed himself into her ass, sliding in easily, but filling her so much farther with his cock.

“Ohhhh,” she moaned. He gripped her shoulder and slid in and out, a careful gliding that was more satisfying to her than receiving him in her pussy, even as it was far too much. She

squeezed her eyes shut and relished the sensation, squealing each time it pushed her comfort, moaning for more each time he retreated.

“Yes,” Zac cried, increasing his tempo and she echoed him, triumphant over his pleasure, greedy for her release. He pounded into her, his strokes growing more reckless and she sobbed the word “yes” over and over until he pressed into the hilt and orgasmed, crying, “Now, Becca!”

Her body climaxed on his command, her legs shivering spasmodically as wave after wave of pleasure cascaded through her.

Dear God, that was amazing.

She felt barely conscious as Zac slipped out of her and lifted her limp body onto the bed, curling his body around hers.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He kissed her temple.

“We can try the new Kung Fu studio. I’m not afraid anymore.”

He ran the pad of his finger along her cheekbone. “It’s not my intention to raise a warrior—is that what you’re afraid of?”

She nodded.

“What I like about a serious studio is he’ll gain confidence and learn structure and discipline. He could get the same thing from ballet or soccer, but it’s

Kung Fu he's interested in."

"What if it were ballet he was interested in?" she challenged.

He grinned at her. "I would not stand in his way."

Her heart pounded in that inexplicable way it always did when she approved of him as a parent. It was like falling in love all over again, every time.

"Thanks for the spanking, too," she said in a small voice.

He grinned, understanding her perfectly.

"Anytime."

"Don't you mean *every* time?"

He rolled her onto her back and climbed over her. "No sulking, sweetheart. I've got more of that where

it came from.”

She giggled, lifting her lips for a kiss, reveling in the way he held her down when he met her lips, the dominance already rekindling her desire.

The End

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Betrothed

Young Lady Julia is offered by the king as a war prize to the Duke of Pembridge after her father tries to forcibly take the Duke's land. Worried that she will suffer as a result of his animosity, she runs away dressed as a page, only to unwittingly end up in the very same Duke's army.

Bronson, the Duke of Pembridge, is not fooled by the little page's disguise for a moment, and offers the lady his protection, not realizing that he is the man she is hiding from. As the attraction between the two grows, Julia is

ultimately forced to face her fate and learn her place as the wife of a man she's come to love.

Loving Lucia

Marco Donarati, the Count of Parma, had no interest in taking a new wife. He got his pleasure from the working ladies, and that suited him just fine. Marco's greatest passion is reserved for his fledgling winery, and therefore he cannot bring himself to refuse when Italy's leading winemaker, Don Edoardo Dante, offers him a source of funds with which to improve his vineyards. In return, the Count reluctantly agrees to make Dante's redheaded daughter Lucia the next

Countess. When he makes the deal, Marco never suspects that he might actually grow to care about his lovely young wife.

Passionate and eager to please, Lucia must navigate her new role as Countess to a husband who holds her at arms' length. When the Count becomes guardian to her twin sister as well, things really heat up. Tested by trials, betrayals, and jealousy, Lucia and Marco must find their way together and often the quickest route is with her bent over his knee for a bare-bottom spanking. Will her wholehearted submission and love be enough to break down her husband's resistance and win his heart for her?

Courting Celia

Celia Dante is notorious for her headstrong ways and getting into mischief. This time, she's out to seduce Tomi, her brother-in-law's handsome steward and the man she cut her teeth flirting with as a young girl. But in addition to losing her virginity to the rakish Duke of Tuscany, her colorful past includes joining her twin sister and brother-in-law in their bed, a fact which Tomi has a hard time swallowing.

When Tomi seems to reject her, Celia's pride spurs her to set herself against him, in spite of the fact that he does not hesitate to pull her over his knee for a sound spanking. As her

spirited actions escalate, Tomi must decide whether he's willing to put aside his jealousy and fully take her in hand, or whether he will let her go and leave Parma forever.

Deathless Love

Kate Strand has always had a crush on Dominic, the owner of the club where her band plays, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that he's a vampire. But when he sniffs out her predilection for spanking and brings her fantasies to life one night, she falls head over heels. The trouble is, Dom is allergic to relationships, or so it seems.

Dom loves knowing how to turn Kate on and domination comes naturally

to him. But he believes he likes Kate more than is good for either of them. In his mind, mortals and vampires don't mix, and the best thing he can do for her is stay far away. But when another vampire targets Dom, Kate gets tangled in the dangerous web and Dom finds himself prepared to sacrifice his own life to save hers. Can he get her back alive? And if so, will they find a way to be together?

Pleasing the Colonel

Trapped in a crevice after a carriage accident, Amanda Downy is not sure whether she'll ever see the light of day again. With her tongue loosened by a fellow passenger's flask of brandy, she

reveals several well-guarded secrets about her life as a governess at Colonel Watson's residence, including the fact that she falsified her references to gain her employment.

The next morning Amanda is horrified when she finds that the passenger who saved her life after the carriage crash is sitting at the breakfast table at Colonel Watson's estate, and it appears that he is the long-absent Colonel himself! Amanda is certain that she will be immediately dismissed, but the Colonel has a different sort of discipline in mind for her...

The Colonel soon learns that in spite of the deceitful manner with which she obtained the position, Miss Downy

is an excellent governess and is much loved by his children. After a firm dose of the leather strap on her bare bottom, he lets her know that she may keep her position as long as she is truthful with him in the future. As time passes, though, the Colonel finds himself thinking of Amanda as he has not thought about any woman since his beloved wife passed away. Though he has no intention of ever marrying again, he cannot deny his growing need for her.

Amanda has a longstanding dislike for stiff military men, yet she warms to the Colonel, discovering that underneath his gruff exterior he is kind and generous. As she wonders if the

attraction is mutual, another suitor makes his interest known. Should she accept his offer? Or should she wait to see if the Colonel will ever make his move?

The Knight's Prisoner

Danewyn, a tavern prostitute, has always been cursed with the Sight—the ability to see into the unknown. It is a trait she has learned to keep hidden from others, but a moment of anger finds her blurting out a prediction about the Red Fox, the rightful king of Britain. Unfortunately, her prediction is overheard by one of the Red Fox's men, putting her in grave danger.

Captured and carried off for questioning, she finds herself prisoner to

Sir Ferrum, an enormous knight who bears the scars of an old injury upon his face. She finds Sir Ferrum to be firm and unyielding, but his treatment of her also reveals a gentleness which she has difficulty reconciling with his harsh discipline. To her dismay, her feelings for him continue to grow, and Dani must decide whether to continue her plans for escape or accept her new role as Sir Ferrum's woman and Seer to the Red Fox.

Under Siege (Included in the book Lords and Ladies: Two Medieval Spanking Novellas)

For Lady Camilla, the only thing worse than managing Falconworth castle

on her own would be her overlord discovering that she is a widow and marrying her off to his wretched nephew. Keeping her husband's death a secret is a top priority, right up there with ensuring that troops from a rival castle don't break down her curtain wall gate with their battering ram.

Yet when a devilishly handsome knight by the name of Sir Balen rides to her rescue, she is reluctant to turn over the control she has become accustomed to wielding. The attraction between them is palpable, but his arrogant assumption of the position and duties of her late husband irritates her, especially because those duties seem to include spanking her bare bottom!

Can she swallow her pride and propose the marriage which she knows would be best for all involved, or will her stubbornness cost her and the people of Falconworth dearly?

The Devil of Whiskey Row

Forced by miserable circumstance to work in a gold-rush brothel, Cora Underhill hates what her life has become. When a fire sweeps through, she welcomes death as an end to it all. But then Jake Diggory crashes through her window for an unwelcome rescue, offering her shelter and a paid position at his establishment. She accepts, in spite of Jake's fearsome reputation as "The Devil Diggory," and soon sees

another side to Jake—the firm but caring side of him which led his girls to name him “Daddy Diggs.”

Life at Daddy Diggs’ is an entirely new experience for Cora. Jake has strict rules which he backs up with over-the-knee discipline, but he will not tolerate any mistreatment of his girls and he can go from playing beautiful music on a piano to defending them with his bare fists. The strangest thing of all, however, is the fact that every girl at Daddy Diggs’ swears that Jake has never slept with her, or with any other woman for that matter, since his fiancée’s death back in Ireland fifteen years ago.

The other prostitutes at Daddy Diggs’ enjoy the power they hold over

men, enjoy making money, and even find pleasure in sex. Cora attempts to emulate them, but she still finds no pleasure in the company of men...until the day she inadvertently arouses the passion of The Devil Diggory and his fierce lovemaking thaws some frozen part of her. But it seems Jake is only attracted to her because she resembles his dead fiancée. Confused by his new feelings for Cora and guilt over his broken vow of celibacy, Jake pushes Cora away. Can he come to terms with his past and claim Cora for his own, or will his grief keep them apart forever?

The Westerfield Affair

Reserved to the point of being

aloof, Lord Westerfield never attended balls or even considered taking a wife... until he met Miss Kitty Stanley and his orderly world turned on end. Determined to have the beautiful and animated sister of his friend from the gambling hall, but doubting his ability to effectively court her, Westerfield strikes a bargain with her brother for her hand.

When the gentlemen present Kitty with the deal, she is furious with them both for neglecting to consult her, but her brother insists he will withdraw his support if she does not comply. Angry, she acts out at a ball, causing a scandal that mushrooms further when Lord Westerfield drags her unchaperoned to his home for a firm spanking.

Upon baring her for chastisement, Westerfield is swept away by desire, and before he can stop himself he has taken her innocence and completed the ruin of her reputation. He offers to release her from the betrothal contract, but her brother insists instead on a hasty marriage. As they attempt to recover from the scandal that becomes known as “the Westerfield Affair,” their marriage is clouded by his shame and her insecurities. Will they be trapped forever in a loveless marriage, or will they have the courage to move past their rough beginning to kindle the passion they both crave?

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Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[More Books by Renee Rose](#)

[Renee Rose Links](#)

Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Epilogue](#)

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