

The background of the cover features a close-up of a man and a woman in a romantic embrace, bathed in a warm, golden light. The woman is looking slightly away from the camera with a soft expression. The overall color palette is dominated by shades of orange and yellow, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. At the bottom of the cover, there is a silhouette of a tropical landscape with several palm trees against a dark background.

# TO DIE FOR

A NOVEL

# CAITYLN WILLOWS

## TO DIE FOR

... Frank's cell phone startled them both, breaking their kiss.

Frank's muttered, "Fuck," said it all. He stomped to the counter to answer the call.

Zoe clutched her robe closed and ran to her bedroom. Back braced on the door, she sank to the floor. Fingers dived for her aching pussy. It didn't take much to make her come.

"Zoe?"

She jumped at the sound of his voice on the other side of the door.

"Go away." Her head buzzed from the orgasm. She half-expected him to barge in, or at least try the doorknob. Disappointment weighed down her heart when she heard his footsteps retreat and the bathroom door close.

Where the hell was her head? People were dead, and all she could think about was coming, about Frank's body pressing her deep into the mattress, about burrowing so far under the covers with him the world would implode and they'd never realize it.

*Lovestruck fool. Horny, lovestruck fool.*

Tears fell, fast and furious. Knees clutched to her chest, Zoe rested her cheek on top of them, slowly rocking while she cried. There was movement behind her—the door being pushed open.

"Don't cry. Please don't cry." When had he returned, or had he ever left and she only imagined it? "Let me in, Zoe."

She knew she shouldn't, not as vulnerable as she felt, not as much as she wanted him. But she did, scooting far enough away to allow Frank to squeeze in. He folded his big body to the floor beside her, arms wrapping so tight around her the world beyond didn't exist. Zoe curled into his chest, palms pressed to those rock-hard pecs. His heart beat as fast as hers. She liked that. She liked it a lot... too much...

ALSO BY CAITLYN WILLOWS

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*Caitlyn's Kisses, Vols. I-V*  
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*Thief Of Hearts*  
*Treasure Hunters*  
*Undercover Lover*  
*White Lies*

# TO DIE FOR

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BY

CAITLYN WILLOWS

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TO DIE FOR  
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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# CHAPTER 1

Fear clawed at Zoe's gut, fighting its way to the surface. Pringles of the monster she'd buried zinged beneath her skin, searching for a way out.

People. She had to be around people. If she went home, another monster might be waiting. Zoe wouldn't risk it—not until she had control firmly in her hands. Not until she could face whatever hell awaited her with dignity and strength.

*Having my .38 in ready reach wouldn't be bad either.*

Gun trumped knife every time. Too bad she'd gotten out of the habit of carrying the weapon. Zoe would rectify that once she got home. Being without threat had made her lackadaisical. If she wasn't diligent...

Dead. She'd be dead.

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*No. That's why you have the black belt... to protect yourself.*

Could she keep her wits about her to remember how to use that skill? Besides, all the martial arts moves in the world couldn't win over a gun. She needed that weapon in her possession.

Zoe gasped for breath, fighting hyperventilation.

Denny's. That's where she could go. Open all night. Always someone there. A favorite place for cops. She'd grab a bite and order her thoughts, make a game plan.

Zoe scanned the jumble of signs, looking for that familiar yellow one. Had she passed it yet? She'd been so upset she barely remembered leaving the precinct. Where the hell was she? Certainly not pointed toward home. She nearly wept with relief when she spied her beacon a block ahead. A Holiday Inn Express was across the street from it. That was an option she hadn't considered. She'd check in for the night, maybe two, get a room on the top floor and hole up until this was over.

She snorted at her foolishness. Clearly, this was never going to be over... until one of them was dead. Zoe didn't plan on that being her.

She eased into the parking lot and found a spot right next to the restaurant. Maybe luck was on her side tonight. Pulling in slow breaths to calm her shattered nerves, she cut the engine. Xavier didn't know where she lived. Chances were slim he'd recognize her on the street—as long as she kept her mouth shut. The encounter was an isolated incident, nothing more. Why would Xavier care? He was rattling her to show he was a big man, nothing more. Old fears ran deep, though. Too deep.

*He knows where you work now.*

True. Zoe wondered if her subconscious had steered her to take an alternate route home.

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*Silly. The shooting was across town. There's no way he could—*

She cut off the thought. There was always a way for a determined person, and he'd sounded damned determined. Thank goodness, her parents were vacationing in Maui and her sister visiting friends in New York. Xavier couldn't have picked a better time to make his move. For another panicked moment, Zoe wondered if he'd planned this. Just as quickly she dismissed the idea. Xavier never planned anything; he was volatile and driven by rage and a very short-temper.

Damn it all, she'd thought this was all in the past. Now she'd inadvertently crossed paths with him. His threat wasn't an idle one. Xavier would hunt her down. It was only a matter of time.

*Not if the cops get him first.*

Zoe was counting on that. Talk about determination. Xavier had killed a police officer tonight, seriously wounding another. *He* was a marked man. She prayed they got to him before he got to her.

A thorough look around confirmed her safety. Still, she didn't let her gaze or attention wander as she looped her purse strap over her shoulder, clutched the hobo bag against her side, and stepped from her F-150. Her rubber soled ankle boots thunked on the sidewalk. Zoe wasted little time getting inside. Once the doors closed behind her, she let the hostess's smile scatter the dark shadows lingering in her mind... at least for the moment. The woman's nametag identified her as Jennifer.

"One?" she asked.

"Yes, just one," Zoe said.

Jennifer plucked a menu from the box behind her. "Table or booth?"

Under normal circumstances her answer would be table.



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Tonight Zoe didn't want to be that exposed. "Booth. Away from the window." Her back against the wall with a clear view of the entrance.

"Right this way." Jennifer led her down the aisle, nodding to other diners as she took Zoe into the bowels of the restaurant.

Zoe saw the men and women too late. Twelve police officers and detectives occupied a large section of tables in the back room where Jennifer intended to seat her. Zoe tapped at the woman's long white sleeve in a vain effort to subtly catch her attention. Again, too late. One by one the men and women stopped what they were doing, all eyes latching onto Zoe. Chairs rumbled against the carpet as they stood... and applauded her.

She wanted to crawl in a hole and never come out. The only thing that kept her feet rooted in place was the pride on Frank Ludwig's face. Zoe's heartbeat triple-timed. If he only knew...

"Come join us." Officer Joanie Robertson yanked over a chair from a nearby table, while Frank's partner, Theo Garcia, waved Zoe their way.

Only that morning Robertson had gone out of her way to avoid her. Zoe was their hero tonight. Tomorrow things would go back to the way they were. Zoe didn't want to muddy the waters by socializing.

She'd heard what some of her co-workers said behind her back; a few even said it to her face. Some of them meant well; the others didn't. Zoe'd learned to live with scathing remarks, dirty looks, and *kindhearted* suggestions. After all, she had only herself to blame for the way she looked. She wasn't a small girl. But Frank—hot Frank who shared her bed in Zoe's nightly fantasies—accepted her with no questions, no attempts to change her. Their friendship was unconditional.

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“No, thank you.” A polite smile came with her refusal. “It’s been a long shift. I need to decompress.” Then she squeezed into the booth, her back to them, and accepted the menu from Jennifer.

“Anything to drink?”

*A bottle of your cheapest wine. And put a straw in it.* “Iced tea, no lemon.”

“Coming right up.”

Zoe stared at the menu. Conversation behind her fell to whispers. Words swam before her eyes. Damn, she was going to start bawling right here. A shadow blocked the light. The second she glanced up, Frank slid in beside her.

“Scoot over.” He butted her hip against hers.

“What are you doing?” Zoe refused to budge.

“I’m sitting with you. What does it look like?”

She flicked her fingers toward the opposite seat. “Then sit there.”

“You know I can’t sit with my back to the door.”

“It looked to me like that’s what you were doing over there.” She motioned to the party behind them.

Frank shrugged. “I lost the toss. Only fair way to determine seating when you have a table of cops.” He nudged again. “Scoot.”

It occurred to Zoe that she could move to the other seat. That meant leaving the brief joy of having Frank next to her. The man made her feel all kinds of crazy happy inside. Safe and sheltered, small and feminine. Worry and fear didn’t dare bother her with Frank by her side. His sheer personality warned them away. She wanted to lean into his solid body and cry her heart out.

“How nice you ran into your husband.” Jennifer slid a tall glass of iced tea across the booth.

Reality slapped Zoe’s daydreams to bits. “Oh, he’s not my

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husband.”

Frank plopped his hand over hers and squeezed. “Not yet.”

Jennifer’s smile drained the power grid. “When’s the wedding?”

“We’re not engaged either.” Zoe slipped her hand from under his and grabbed her straw.

“Not yet.” Frank dropped his hand to her thigh, shocking Zoe senseless. Her clit cheered at how near he was. Juices flowed in anticipation of more. “I’m still trying to get her to notice me.”

Jennifer’s gaze ping-ponged between them. Her smile dimmed while she pondered a response, or planned how she could get Frank for herself. Although, he was a bit old for her. Hell, he was a bit old for Zoe, too, but that didn’t stop her from lusting after him. She’d calculated around a ten-year age gap. Her fantasies of him pressing her against the nearest wall and fucking her senseless didn’t care. A thread of jealousy twined its way to the surface. If Jennifer started flirting—

“Then I’m guessing this will all be on one ticket?” Jennifer finally asked.

“Absolutely.” This time Frank draped his arm around Zoe shoulders and squeezed.

Zoe steeled herself against the rush of emotion. What the hell was he up to? She was going to have to stock up on batteries before she went home tonight—if she went home—and she just might send the bill to Frank.

“We still need a few minutes,” he told Jennifer.

“I’ll make sure your server knows.”

Zoe waited until Jennifer’s back was turned, then shrugged his arm away. “Quit joking. I’m not in the mood to be played with.” A lie. Most nights she wanted nothing more than for Frank to play

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with her. Zoe stabbed her straw amid the ice cubes and took a long sip. Although at the rate her horny was building, dumping the glass into her lap might be a better idea.

Frank rested his forearms on the table, body half-turned her way—which was quite a feat since he took up as much space as Zoe. “I’m not joking or playing. Consider this our first date.”

She stirred the ice, refusing to meet the gaze burning a hole through the side of her face. Tolliver’s death was going to have long-term repercussions. “Look, it’s been a long day. I know how grateful you are that—”

“It’s got nothing to do with gratitude.” He leaned closer, warmth surrounding her. “Open your eyes, honey.”

She was clueless and didn’t feel like dancing around whatever he was hinting at. So she let her silence build a wall between them.

Frank eased away, taking that warmth with him. Zoe’s heart cried for the loss.

“I don’t think she could’ve seated us at a smaller booth.” Frank planted his feet on the floor and pushed the booth back. “That’s better.”

“Is that even allowed?” she whispered.

“What’s she going to do? Lock me up? I’m the poe-lease.” He thumbed his chest.

Zoe snickered. She knew she shouldn’t encourage him, especially when she was still displeased over his previous antics. She pretended her tea held more interest, which earned her his body bracketing hers once more. This is how it’d feel if they had sex—Frank looming over her, taking charge of their pleasure. God, she ached!

“Sure you don’t want something a little stronger than tea?” he asked.

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“Driving.” Zoe drew her finger through the moisture beading her glass.

“I’ll see you get home safe and sound. After what you did today, you deserve a drink... or two.” His arm brushed hers. She’d rather have it around her again, even if he’d meant it as a joke.

“My truck—”

“I’ll either make sure it gets to your house, or I’ll pick you up in the morning.” Long fingers traced hers. “You’re shaking.”

Fear coupled with a looming adrenaline crash did that to a person.

“What can I get you two cuddlebugs tonight?”

Zoe and Frank jumped at the server’s abrupt appearance. Norma hovered at the table, pad in hand, gray hair combed back in a tight ponytail that dangled in its mesh bag, making it resemble something you’d pull from a bathroom sink drain. Zoe didn’t bother to correct Norma’s assumption they were a couple. What harm could come from pretending?

“The lady would like a glass of merlot. We’ll have patty melts with fries.” He glanced at Zoe for confirmation, then, at her nod, told their server, “And an order of onion rings.”

“Coming right up.” Norma shot off. Zoe had never seen anyone move so fast.

“I’m going to need the wine to scrub my veins from this high cholesterol meal.” She pushed her tea aside. Frank took it for himself.

“It’s comfort food, and we damn well deserve it. You especially. We’re alive. It’s time we started taking advantage of that.”

He’d closed her in again, his body nearly surrounding her. Zoe didn’t give an inch. This was what it felt like to be near the man.

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She soaked it all in for her fantasies later.

“You saved a man’s life tonight, Zoe. That sweet voice of yours gave DiCarlo hope to hang on. Because of you, he’ll see his wife and kids again. There isn’t a cop on the force who hasn’t heard about it, or listened to it play out over the radio.”

Did they also hear Tolliver’s last gasping breath? She hadn’t been able to save him. It was a miracle she’d stopped Xavier when she did. A quirk of fate. Hearing her voice intrigued him enough to spare DiCarlo... and make her his new target.

*Ay chica... such a pretty voice. Like an angel in the night. Maybe I come see you, eh? Clip those wings again. Your friend here, he ain’t gonna last. I cut him deep. Try, bitch. You’re next, and I’m gonna make it hurt.*

“I’ll bet the sound clip’s already gone viral,” Frank said. “You know the newshounds have glommed on to it.”

Yes, they’d already started swarming the precinct for information as she left work.

Zoe grabbed the merlot when the glass appeared and gulped down half.

“Easy, honey.” Frank put his arm around her, fingers tracing soothing circles on her shoulder. “The guys are on it. They’ll figure out who this asshole is and put him behind bars.”

*Oh, God.* “They... they don’t know who he is?” A drop of wine splashed on the back of her hand. She *was* shaking, but she couldn’t loosen her death grip on the glass.

“Not yet. He wore gloves, had a ski mask on. Took the knife with him. Left no trace.”

*Shit. Now what?* She stared at that drop of wine, frozen on her skin as if time itself had stopped waiting for her to woman-up.

“I... I know who he is.” Zoe barely heard the words herself, so

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surely Frank hadn't. She wasn't sure she could dredge the courage to say them again.

“What? How?”

Her pride took a nosedive, but it was a small price to pay for taking a cop killer off the streets.

“Xavier Sanchez. We lived together years ago. I'm the reason he was sent to prison in the first place. That threat he made to me over the radio was real.” She drained the glass and signaled Norma for another.

## CHAPTER 2

Frank loved a woman he could get a hold of, but he'd had one hell of a time trying to get hold of Zoe White. He'd wondered if deep down inside he was a coward. From the second Frank first heard Zoe's voice, he knew she was the woman of his dreams. Laying eyes on her cinched the feeling. Yet he'd skirted a full-blown go-get-her approach and had opted for subtle... for the last six months.

He didn't need a head shrink to analyze his courtship. Frank knew damn good and well why he proceeded with caution—he was scared to death of being shot down.

Zoe was a goddess. Pure and simple. Five-foot-ten-inches of woman with a statuesque figure that put film queens of yesteryear to shame. She was the epitome of an old country song with “ruby



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red lips, coal black hair, and eyes that could tempt any man.” Added to that was a slender streak of white hair just behind her left ear that begged his fingers to toy with it.

But it was her voice that was Zoe’s claim to fame—calm, clear, soft no matter what the circumstance, uttered in tones that would make gods weep. Children and dogs flocked to her. He could see her in a Disney movie, forest animals crowded around her. Frank couldn’t bear it if he made a move and she kicked him to the curb.

That was this morning. This was now, after a hellish day where one officer had died and another managed to hang on... thanks to Zoe. Frank’s chest had swelled three times its size hearing her talk to DiCarlo. It killed him not to be able to say, “She’s *my* woman.” It killed him even more to realize Tolliver’s life had ended in a second. That could happen to any of them at any time. Death wasn’t particular about whom it claimed. In the same instant he knew Tolliver’s life flashed before his eyes, Frank’s did as well. He didn’t like what he saw—a life without Zoe in it; a life where he’d been too cowardly to make a move.

Then she walked into Denny’s wearing a long, green and brown flowery skirt that fluttered around her calves as she walked and made her look like a forest queen. A dark green top skimmed her torso, discreetly displaying her substantial bosom. Forty-D, he was sure of it. He longed to bury himself between those breasts, face *and* cock. It had to be a sign from above that she’d walked in at the moment he wanted her most.

Now this news. Thoughts circled his brain, waiting for landing instructions.

“You’d better call it in. You know you want to. You know you have to.”

Frank snapped back to the present at Zoe’s words. Norma

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traded full wineglass for empty, then darted away.

“Be right back.” He fished his cell phone from his trousers pocket as he stood.

“I’m not going anywhere.” She took a sip of wine and combed her fingers through her long, silky black hair. Funny how so simple a gesture revved his engines. Insane how that flash of white clenched his balls.

Frank’s coworkers looked his way when he walked back to their table. Every one of them wore a frown.

“She all right?” Robertson asked.

“No.” He punched in the number for the lead detective on this case. “She knows the perp. That threat the asshole made to her tonight was real.” Carson picked up on the first ring. Frank didn’t waste time on preliminaries. “Hey, it’s Ludwig... the guy you’re looking for is Xavier Sanchez. Should have a record. Was in prison.”

“How’d you get the info?” Carson always sounded like he was chewing gravel. Smoking three packs a day did that to a person.

“The source is reliable.” He filled him in while the others listened.

Gazes shifted Zoe’s way. Robertson made a move to go to her. Frank pressed her back into her chair and shook his head. No way was anyone else horning in tonight. Zoe’s was his to watch and protect, especially from some of the two-faced bitches and sons-a-bitches at this table.

“What can we do?” Theo asked when Frank ended the call.

*Stay out of my way and let me claim my woman.* “Zoe’s going to have a couple of well-deserved drinks tonight while we eat dinner. Then I’m going to take her home and make sure she’s safe. If one of you could get her truck to her house, I’d appreciate it.”

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“Got it.” Robertson snapped to her feet. Again, Frank halted her charge. She was a great officer, but a little too gung-ho at times... like now.

“I’ll get the keys for you. Considering some of the snide comments you’ve made about Zoe since she started at the precinct, I don’t think you’re one of her favorite people.”

Robertson’s reddened face was a near match to the cherry tomatoes dotting her salad. Other guilty parties at the table stared at their plates, the wall, their fingernails... everywhere but at Frank. Yeah, Frank had overheard the remarks about her full figure and height. No one dared say them to his face. They knew how he felt about shit like that.

“Don’t crowd her.” He stuffed his phone into the depths of his pocket. “Let me get the full story from her before you all rush back to the station to help nail this guy. After what she did today, she deserves a little dignity. I hope that lasts more than one day.”

Frank left them to ponder the error of their ways and walked to Zoe’s booth. Norma juggled a full tray on her Popeye forearms, yet she still waited until he sat before putting the order down. Comfort food had lost its appeal.

“Another wine?”

“Yes,” Frank answered for her.

“Not good.” Zoe waved a french fry at him. “Your crew back there will have to carry me out. And, as we all know, it’ll take all of them to do the job.” She flipped the end of the fry into her mouth.

“That’s bullshit and you know it.” He hated when she made jokes at her own expense. She let other people’s perceptions cloud the beauty she was. The wine wasn’t helping either. “Those jerks aren’t touching you. I can carry you out myself if it comes to that.”

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“You turn into the Incredible Hulk after dark?” She hooked an onion ring.

Frank gave her his best no-nonsense stare. “Only when someone fucks with people I care about.”

Zoe’s eyes widened. Halfway to her gaping mouth, the onion ring dangled from her finger, forgotten. Maybe he’d finally gotten her to understand what she meant to him. He snatched her onion ring for himself.

“You’ll have to make a statement at some point,” he said around a bite.

Zoe picked up her sandwich and took a big bite, a clear signal he’d been ignored.

“Why didn’t you say something earlier?” he asked.

She shrugged and looked like she was attempting to memorize the diamond pattern in the bench seat across from them. Frank gave her time. Her relationship with Sanchez wasn’t anything he couldn’t glean from reading old reports later, but he wanted to hear it from her. He wanted her feelings and emotions, wanted them all and any tears that came with it soaking his shirt, while his arms gave her shelter and a lifetime of unconditional love. He wanted this all resolved so he could finally have her in his bed, stripped naked and his to *devour*. He’d take his time, too. Taste every inch of her beautiful body inside and out, then spread those soft thighs and sink to the hilt.

Frank ignored the growing problem in his trousers and pressed her once more. “You can tell me, Zoe. You can tell me anything.”

She set her sandwich down, wiped greasy fingers on her napkin, and took a big gulp of wine. “Fear, shock, shame. I’m not deaf or stupid, Frank. I hear what people whisper behind my back about my *full figure*. I hear them call me an amazon, which is

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certainly better than Shamu.” She pointed to the delectable strand of white hair. “The last thing I wanted was for everyone to realize how stupid I’d been.”

“We all make mistakes. I did.” He started to eat, hoping to try to keep the conversation casual and communication open, get the information he needed without Zoe shutting down... and shutting him out. He wanted in, all the way.

“Your mistake involved a marriage. I could’ve walked away from my mistake and didn’t.” She picked up her fork and pulled her sandwich apart.

“You left at some point, or are you still involved with him?”

“No, I’m not. I left years ago. Right after I turned him in.” She carved off a bite-size piece of hamburger.

“Were you involved in any of his criminal activities?”

Zoe’s head jerked around, gaze shooting lasers at him. “Would I be working for the police department if I had? No. He had his own little *posse* for that.” She returned her attention to her food, picking it apart, but not eating any of it.

Frank’s tension eased. He chewed until his fear mode subsided. Yeah, she’d scared him. He’d never seen sweet Zoe mad at anyone and he sure as hell didn’t like it flashed his way.

“Why’d you stay?” he asked.

Zoe dropped her fork, shoved her barely touched food away, and pulled the wineglass closer. “I was blind and stupid. About the only *decent* thing about the jerk was that he forbid any of his friends to lay a hand on me... or talk to me for that matter. I stayed in the bedroom whenever they were over. Only one I ever met was Rico, and that was by accident since he always seemed to be waiting outside the bathroom every time I went.”

Norma appeared with glass number three. Zoe drained number

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two and handed it to her. “I need chocolate and lots of it.”

“One chocolate cake coming right up. I’ll put my special touch on it.” To her credit, Norma didn’t bat an eye over the request, the uneaten meal, or the continual flow of wine.

“What made you finally leave?” he asked when they were alone again. He felt Zoe’s sigh in his bones. It made him want to hold her tight and never let go. He suspected doing that now would have the opposite effect to he wanted.

“My eyes finally opened.”

She stroked the stem of the glass, up and down, up and down, the action too reminiscent of something else he wanted from her. His penis didn’t care how critical this moment was or how inappropriate an erection was right now. It was primed and ready for action.

“It sounds like an exaggeration when I say that everything happened all at once.” Zoe’s voice hit those tones Frank loved so well—deep and sultry, yet clear and pure, vibrating through his body. He recognized, too, she was at that place when confession occurred. Despite the party planner in his trousers, he leaned closer and listened.

“I found out I was pregnant seconds before I learned he and his crew had robbed a convenience store and shot the owner. He thought I was in the bathroom and couldn’t hear him talking to Rico about it. When he took off, I called my parents and sister to come get me. Then I called the police and turned him in. They all arrived at the same time—my family, the police, and Xavier. He clocked me hard.” She pointed to the white hair, a remnant from the wound she’d received. Frank wondered how many other “souvenirs” she had from her time with the bastard. “There was a brief hostage situation and that was that. I was free.”

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She heaved another sigh, this one of pleasure, when Norma placed a mountain of cake, ice cream, and chocolate fudge in front of Zoe.

“How long were you together?” His mouth watered at the sight of her fork sinking into the cake. Frank loved his chocolate, too. She’d give him a bite if he asked. Maybe even off her fork. He could imagine wrapping his hand over hers, guiding the treat toward his mouth, pulling it off millimeter by millimeter, then licking—

“Too long. Six months total.” She pressed her lips together. He swore he heard her *mmmm*. If she could turn him on without even trying, what would she do to him if she tried? The possibilities spawned more fantasies than Frank could count.

“He was a charmer. Swept me off my feet with carnations and sweet talk.”

Frank thanked God he hadn’t gone the flower route in his pursuit of Zoe.

“It went downhill slowly after we became a couple. I prefer to leave the details out, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t.” He was half-ready to kill the bastard as it was. He didn’t need a full account. “I take it he wasn’t too thrilled to learn you turned him in.”

She gave a little laugh and shook her head. “Nope. Damn pissed. Threatened me, my family—”

“Your baby?”

Zoe laid her fork down and reached for the glass. “Miscarriage.” Another healthy drink and she was back at the cake. “My health wasn’t so good then.”

“Your family will be in danger now, too.”

“My parents and sister are off on their respective vacations.

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They're safe, and I sure as hell hope this is resolved before they get back. He'll have to hunt to find me. He's been out for six months and hasn't bothered my parents or Alicia, though. I believe it would be a parole violation."

Frank barked a laugh. "Clearly he's not too worried about violating parole since he killed a cop tonight. Hearing you obviously set him off more."

She started drawing designs in the puddle of fudge. "I thought I was in the clear until tonight. Something triggered him, but it doesn't take much. He was pissed."

Zoe drooped her head until her hair covered her face from his view. Frank knew she was fighting tears. He clutched his iced tea glass to keep from sliding her hair back behind her ear and kissing her. One, because they were in full view of the world. Two, because Zoe might deck him. Three, because of the combination of merlot and chocolate on her mouth would tumble him over the edge and then the world would be seeing more than a chaste kiss.

Frank put some distance between them while he called Carson to request a safety watch on Zoe's house.

"I should call my family. I don't want them hearing this on the news." She looked up at the question. Tears clung to her dark eyelashes.

"Yes, they need to know what's going on."

She shoved the half-eaten dessert away and dug her phone from her purse. While she made her calls, Frank finished the cake and ordered a fourth drink for Zoe. The third was history before the call to her parents connected. The fourth was gone at the end of her call to her sister.

"Now I'm well and truly drunk, time to go home." She dropped the phone into her purse, dragged the strap over her shoulder, and



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tried to nudge him from the seat.

Frank didn't budge. "Are you a mean drunk, a happy one, boisterous? What am I dealing with?"

"How the hell should I know? I rarely get drunk. Two glasses of wine are my limit."

"Ah... bitchy."

"I jus' wanna go home."

"Let's take it slow then. I get out first and offer my hand—"

"I don't need—"

"Let me be the gentleman, okay? I don't often get the chance."

Her shoulders sagged with her nod. "It'll be a nice change a pace for me. And since you wanna pretend this is a first date—"

"Maybe I wasn't pretending."

A kiss of pink covered her cheeks. Frank wasn't sure if she was blushing or the wine was kicking in. *Probably a little of both.* He needed to get her home fast.

Zoe giggled. "Oh, you." She poked his bicep and the giggles escalated to an unladylike snort.

*Yeah... home real fast.*

"Come on." He patted her knee. "Let's go."

Frank slid from the booth, then extended his hand to her. Zoe grabbed his fingers. Her eyes were bright, face backlit with humor and what he hoped was joy. The chances of her remembering this in the morning were few. Frank would take what he could get for now, within reason. He drew her against him as she stood and he couldn't help wrapping his arm around her waist. True, she might need a steady hand, but Frank needed to have her against him. God, it felt good. Her curvy figure meshed with his. What would they be like in bed all twined together?

He swallowed hard and ordered his erection at rest. It didn't

## *TO DIE FOR*

listen.

Zoe's height was perfect—four inches shorter than him. No bending to have to kiss her. Images of taking her up against the wall sliced through his groin.

"I feel lil woozy." She braced one hand on the table.

"Then let's get you to my car before a little turns into a lot. Give me your keys. Robertson is going to follow us home in your truck."

Zoe shoved her free hand into a side pouch, drawing out a ring of keys. "My house key is on that ring, too."

"She'll be right behind us." He took the keys, then tossed them to Robertson. She caught them with one hand. That signaled the entire table to stand.

"They're watchin', aren't they?" she asked.

"They're only people who want to help." He indulged himself, giving her a hug he passed off as a squeeze. "Slow steps at first. If you feel like you're going to pass out, let me know."

"And you'll carry me."

Frank wasn't sure if she was being sarcastic or not.

"Damn right I will."

A shudder coursed through her body. Zoe tried to look up at him, but lost her balance. He righted her and started for the door.

She did better than he expected. Her step faltered when they reached his red Challenger. "I figured ya'd have a muscle car, but didn't realize ya'd go for sporty."

"My girls insisted I needed a chick magnet."

"Does it work?" She wobbled a little. He braced her upright with one hand and reached for the door with the other.

"You're a chick, aren't you?" He opened the door and helped her inside. Zoe more or less plopped into the seat.

*TO DIE FOR*

“I am.”

She glanced up from under those long lashes. A smile quirked her lips. He was dealing with a flirty drunk and here he was, having to be the good guy.

“Buckle up.” He closed the door and hurried to the driver’s side.

Zoe stared out the windshield and twirled her hair. “I think I’m a horny drunk.”

Frank smothered a groan and took advantage of her inattention to adjust his erection. “I don’t even know how to respond to that one.”

“Oh.. ” She giggled. “I can think of a couple of ways.” That come-get-me smile flashed his way.

“Give me your address and I’ll punch it into the system.” He typed while she recited the information. For extra measure, he rolled down the window and passed the address along to Robertson. They were good to go. Now to get Zoe home. Frank hoped the drive would help put her to sleep.

No such luck.

Within fifteen minutes, he pulled into a driveway of a small house of indeterminate light color—just like all the other houses wedged around it. The yard was devoid of vegetation save a few patches of grass. A bedraggled elm in the neighbor’s yard covered both properties. Huge roots made having a decent lawn impossible and threatened to heave driveway, sidewalk, and the street.

“It needs work, but I like it,” Zoe declared. “No one can hide against my house. If anyone tries ta sneak up, they’ll trip on the roots. Splack! Soon’s I can, I’m having bars put on the windows, too. Maybe sooner, under the cirsumstances. God, I’m drunk.”

“You sure are.”

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Headlights from Robertson's arrival flashed over them. Frank and Zoe opened their seat belts at the same time, then the doors. As he hurried toward Robertson to retrieve Zoe's keys, Frank noticed Zoe had moved no farther than the side of his car.

"Need help?" Robertson asked.

"Got it. Go on."

She hesitated, then walked on to Theo's car.

"I feel like a bobble head doll," Zoe said when he reached her side. Theo's headlights swept over them. "Do I look like one?"

Smiling, he tucked his arm around her. "No. But I've seen drunk sailors with surer footing than you."

Zoe fisted his T-shirt and looked up at him. "Whose gonna guard me when you're gone?"

Frank tightened his hold to help keep her from swaying. "Honey, I'm not going anywhere."

"You're goin' on vacation day after tomorrow. Spring break. The girls."

He muttered a string of curses in his head. With everything else going on, it'd temporarily slipped his mind that he had his daughters for the week. "They'll catch him by then. The guy's a cop killer. He won't get far."

This news didn't placate her. "You don't know Xavier."

"And I don't want to." He edged her toward the house. "Come on. Time to call it a night."

She leaned into him, head braced against his chest. It made walking difficult, but Frank wouldn't have pushed her aside for the world. He was living his dream, or at least part of it. Yeah, she was drunk, but what harm came from holding her close?

The porch light clicked on when they neared. Zoe slipped the keys from his hand, found the correct one, and held it up to him.

## TO DIE FOR

His fingers brushed hers slowly as he took them back. Frank regretted the tiny seduction. He had no right leading her on in her condition since he'd never take advantage of a drunken woman, no matter how badly he might want her.

More lights clicked on when he opened the door. Zoe slipped inside and sank into the nearest chair. Frank secured the deadbolt behind him while he tried to absorb his shock at seeing her place. He'd been expecting color and life. Hospital rooms held more character than her living room. Designers might call it minimalistic. Frank found it... sad. One couch, two chairs, end tables between them. All black with white cushions. Black and white, all around. No clutter. No sign anyone lived here expect for the TV against the wall. He glanced into the adjoining kitchen and found more of the same.

"Furniture came with the house," she said. "One day I'll..."

How often had he heard her use that phrase or one similar? *One day I'm going to...*

"Two bedrooms, but only one has a bed." She flicked off her shoes, digging her toes into the white carpet. "That's not gonna be a problem for us."

*Uh-oh.* "Let's get you into bed."

"Ooo... I was thinking the same thing."

Zoe latched on to his shoulders when he reached for her. In one fluid motion, she was out of the chair and wrapped around him. Her mouth covered his, tongue diving between his lips. Frank's body buzzed. His brain shut down and another part of his anatomy took over. He lost his balance and tried to catch them before they fell.

Too late he realized Zoe had somehow maneuvered them toward the couch. They toppled into the cushions, his body wedged

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too nicely against hers. His hips moved of their own volition, thrusting against her crotch. Zoe's groan matched his. She snapped her legs over his hips and deepened the kiss.

Frank's common sense crawled to the surface, shattering the lust-fog shrouding his brain. He caught her wrists when she dived her hands toward his crotch, and reluctantly broke the kiss.

"Stop, Zoe. No."

"Please don't say that, Frank. I want ya so, so bad. I have for months."

*Now she tells me.* "And I want you. But not like this. Not when you're drunk."

"Oh, but I ache." She writhed against his erection.

He fought the resurfacing fog and pushed to his knees. Her skirt had bunched up her thighs, giving Frank a sweet view he'd remember to his dying day. Not creamy white, but softly tanned.

"Like what you see?" She used the full power of her sultry tones, devastating Frank's willpower. All he could do was stare as she grabbed her skirt and pulled it higher until...

"No no no." He yanked her skirt back down. God, he could smell her arousal!

"Ah, please." She walked her fingers up his thighs. "It won't take long. I'm very, very close. Jus' one little touch and... ahh time."

When he pulled her hands away from her target, she yanked his right to her crotch. Heat bathed his fingers. He should jerk away. He knew he should.

Pressing into her, Frank leaned in. "No," he forced himself to say and moved away.

"But why?" She sat up, reaching for him.

Frank hovered over her, fists deep in the cushions, forcing her

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back until she had no choice but to look into his eyes. “You’re drunk. It’s not going to happen, no matter how bad we want it. It’ll change everything between us. Is that what you want? Are you ready for that?”

Zoe blinked, then slowly shook her head.

“Now get to bed. I’ll find a pillow and blanket for the couch.”

“O-okay.”

He’d won. Thank God. Because he wasn’t sure he’d win another round. Zoe was too soft and sweet, too perfect against his body.

Frank pushed away, not bothering to hide what he was pretty sure was going to be a perpetual erection. It didn’t help when Zoe’s gaze dropped to his crotch and she slowly licked her lips. Putting one giant step between them, he watched her stand, then braced himself for Round Two when she paused. She moved on to the bathroom. Frank waited until he heard water running before going in search of pillow and blanket.

He found both in the hall closet and was about to return to the living room when curiosity tugged at him to open the door to the second bedroom. Water still ran in the bathroom. It was safe to snoop. Suitcases, cardboard boxes, and various packing materials lay behind the door.

“No sense unpacking when I might find myself leaving soon.”

Frank jumped at the sound of her voice behind him. Caught—with no excuse. “Sorry,” he muttered and shut the door.

“Don’t be.” Zoe was fresh-faced and dressed in a floaty blue nightie that kissed her knees. “Being nosy’s what makes you a good detective. Good night.”

“Night.” He walked on to the couch, noting she offered no further explanation about the room. He’d save any interrogation

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until breakfast.

“Hey, Frank,” she called out.

“Yeah?”

“I’m afraid.”

Trap or truth? Frank tossed the pillow and blanket to the couch and walked back to her room.

Zoe lay on her side, staring at the window on the facing wall. The white lace curtains were closed, fully lined against peepers. He strode to it to check the lock and found it secure, as well as the window next to it.

“They’re good.” Against his better judgment, he sat on the bed beside her, then doubled jeopardy by indulging his need to comb his fingers through that strand of white hair.

“Would you sleep in here with me?”

*Ding! Round Two.*

“Zoe—”

“I’m scared. I need you beside me. I need you to hold me. If you don’t come in here, I’m coming out there. I doubt the couch will be comfortable with two of us.”

“All right.” He was such a stooge. “But no funny stuff.” He shook his finger to get his point across. Zoe ignored him, much like all the other women in his life. “And I’m sleeping on top of the covers.”

He didn’t give her any chance to argue either. By the time he’d turned off the lights in the other room and returned with said blanket, Zoe had also cut the lights in the bedroom. It gave him the privacy he needed to strip down to his boxers. He stretched out next to her, snapped the blanket in place, and rolled to face her.

“Thank you,” she said when he draped his arm around her.

“No problem. That’s what friends are for.” *Now go to sleep.* He



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tensed, waiting for her next move. Sure enough, she wiggled her ass against him.

*Jesus, woman, where were you when I didn't have a conscience?*

"Stop it, Zoe. Why do you have to make this so hard?"

"Cuz I want you soooo bad. Boy... it is hard."

*Oh, yes, very hard.* "Stop it or—"

"You'll turn me over your knee?" She giggled and wiggled again.

"Or I'll leave and send Robertson over to guard you. And that's no joke. I've had just about all I can bear."

Frank waited for an apology, another move to test him, or—God forbid—tears. There was nothing but silence and her rigid body lying next to his. He waited her out, wondering what her next move would be and if he could be strong enough to hold out if she came on to him again. His endurance level had tanked.

Then he felt her relax by slow degrees. Deep, slow breaths told him she was sleeping. He gave it a few minutes, then slipped from the bed to calm his raging beast of a cock.

Frank tiptoed to her bathroom, erection leading the way by a good ten inches... and he only measured eight. The damn thing was filled to bursting. One touch from the right hand would have him spewing gallons for hours. His hand would have to do—a poor substitute for what he dreamed would be nimble fingers.

He stripped his boxers once he'd shut the door behind him. Like the rest of Zoe's house, the bathroom was without personal touch, although it did possess a bit of color in the sea green trashcan and matching rugs and towel. All else was white.

While idly stroking his penis, Frank debated his options and decided on the tub. He found a towel in the narrow, sparse linen

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closet. Surely Zoe wouldn't begrudge him its use. She didn't need to know the specifics of why he'd suddenly needed a shower, no matter how badly Frank wanted to share them with her.

He tossed the towel onto the closed toilet, then stepped into the tub and eased the curtain closed to keep the rings from clattering. A twist of the knobs sent warm spray washing over him. Frank sank to the bottom of the tub and stretched out. One hand gripped his cock; the other kneaded his sac. He dreamed of Zoe on her knees between his legs, mouth tormenting his cock and balls, fingers squeezing and stroking him to madness right before her ruby red lips closed over his dick and sucked him deep.

Frank choked back a groan and clenched his jaw against the fire sizzling over his nerves on a course to his erection. He squeezed his sac hard, fist flying over his cock. He gasped, then closed his eyes against the force building. His body took command. Frank ordered it to remain silent and gave his will over to the moment. His hips snapped upward, launching an orgasm Frank swore turned him inside out. He saw a flash of white behind his eyelids and wondered if that was how far his semen had backed up. It jetted from that tiny slit at the crown of his cock, and he prayed it didn't shoot over the top of the shower curtain.

Finally it was over. Frank lay panting on the bottom of Zoe's tub. He half-expected the water to rinse his earthly remains down the drain. He grabbed the bar of soap—white, of course—from the holder and lathered his hands for a quick wash. It helped rouse him enough to move and soon he was crawling back into bed with Zoe. This time under the covers.

He spooned close to her. Zoe wiggled against him in her sleep. So natural. So perfect. Now he could sleep. Another part of his anatomy disagreed.

## CHAPTER 3

Zoe smacked her alarm clock off the nightstand. The creature had the audacity to keep beeping. She snapped back the covers to hunt the menace down. One misstep silenced the beast forever.

*Great.* Now she had to go to the store after work. If she went to work.

She clutched her head to stop the incessant pounding. Her mouth tasted like bantha poodoo. Not to mention the odorous booze cloud wafting around her. All of which fared much better than her self-esteem. How in the hell could she ever face Frank again? Each second she sat there, the agony grew as the memories resurfaced. She'd all but stripped naked and danced the hootchie cootchie.

*Maybe it's not as bad as you remember.*

## TO DIE FOR

Zoe thanked the good fairy barely gripping her shoulder. Her relief lasted as long as it took to remember, *You'll turn me over your knee?*

“Ah, Jeez Louise.” She scrubbed at her face and forced herself to stand. He'd be going on vacation tomorrow and they had a week to put this all behind them. Then they could forget all about... *I think I'm a horny drunk.*

*Quit moping. You're gonna be late for work.*

She stared at the phone, debating whether to call in sick. No sense in that. A lot of cops witnessed her drunken downfall last night. She'd never hear the end of it if she didn't show up for work today. Besides, she'd go crazy staring at these four walls all day, wondering if Xavier lurked outside waiting for a chance to attack.

Zoe shook off her malaise and stumbled toward the bathroom. The scent of fresh coffee beckoned her in a different direction. Her heart did a little somersault at Frank's consideration. If he'd been thoughtful enough to make coffee, then all hope wasn't lost.

*Idiot. He'd want coffee for himself.* Her bad fairy clawed her way up to Zoe's other shoulder. Zoe wondered how *she* faired after last night's drunk fest. Probably loved every minute.

She did an about-face and let the delicious aroma of fresh coffee lead her to the kitchen. The shock of seeing Frank sitting at her small fifties-era table nearly stopped Zoe's heart. He flipped through *USA Today* and buttered what appeared to be a raisin bagel.

*So he left and came back?*

Speechless, all she could do was stand in the doorway and stare. Was it too late to ease away to the bathroom? Frank glanced up, brown eyes displaying no emotion. *Yep, too late.*

Zoe wanted to die on the spot. She reeked of last night's folly,

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in addition to her less than stellar morning appearance—tousled hair, nightgown all awry, and some serious morning breath. She twisted her nightie into place. God, she'd gone to bed without panties on!

*What the fuck?*

Or had he removed them last night, and she'd been so drunk she couldn't remember?

No, Frank would never take advantage of her like that. He'd even said so. If only she could remember his exact words.

"Good morning." Frank pushed away from the table and headed for the coffeepot.

"Morning," she managed to mumble, and tugged her nightgown to keep from flashing him. Could he see through it?

Zoe dared a glance down when he'd turned his back to pour her a mug of coffee. Sure enough the shadow of her nipples showed through, and farther down—

"Here you go."

She jumped at the sound of Frank's voice. He stood before her, iridescent Luxor Casino mug extended. Zoe wrapped her hands around it. He'd remembered creamer, too. Now if he'd only put some distance between them.

Zoe kept her gaze lowered as she blew the steam off. Unfortunately, that gave her a very nice view of his healthy erection. The sight heated her from head to toe.

"I need to take a shower." She hurried away before he could stop her, before she gave in to the urge to slither her body against his. The ache below made that a feat for godlings.

Zoe leaned against the barrier of the bathroom door and sucked down the piping hot coffee, hoping it would restore her senses. But he'd gotten the creamer exactly right, making for a rich, just-right

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brew that went down fast. The mug clattered against the bathroom vanity. Every muscle in her body quivered. She yanked the nightgown over her head and tossed it in the hamper. A twist of her wrists turned on the bathroom faucets. Cold seemed the best option, but Zoe had always been a wimp when it came to that. She also wasn't fool enough to believe she could tough this one out. She needed an orgasm and she needed one now.

She fondled her breasts while the water heated to her comfort level. With each tug of her nipples, she imagined Frank's fingers twirling and pinching until the tips were rock-hard. Then he'd graze his teeth over them while his hands delved lower, parting her folds to find her clit. It, too, would feel the tease. He'd bring her to the edge, then stab into her heat. Lips would crawl down her body and latch on. And when she'd come and come and come again, he'd lay atop her, nudge her thighs wide, and plunge that big cock home.

Zoe whimpered. Steam billowed up from the tub. The shower would have to wait. She stepped in and slid down. Feet braced over the faucets, she eased into position and gasped when the water hit her crotch. Orgasm burst from her within seconds. Now she could face Frank. Once her senses stopped swimming.

A knock at the bathroom door shattered her bliss. She jerked the shower curtain in place as she scrambled upright.

"What? What is it?"

"Just wanted to tell you to take your time," was his muffled response. The door opened a crack, setting her heart racing. "We can be late."

"Why? What's happened?" She wadded the edge of the plastic curtain. "Did they find him? Is he—"

"Not yet. We... we need to talk."

## *TO DIE FOR*

He closed the door, and she knew he'd walked away. Fear twisted her gut. She'd screwed up big time. Made a fool of herself the night before and lost her friendship with Frank. She'd fix it, that was all. Convince him it was the wine talking, nothing more. If that didn't work, Zoe would put it all on him and his teasing about first dates, marriage, and all that. He'd spun her up when she was vulnerable, so had decided to give a little of that teasing back to him to scare him and put him back in his place.

That's when the tears came. Zoe clamped her hand over her chin to keep it from quivering. Fat lot of good that did. This time she did crank the hot water down to nothing and flicked on the shower. The blast of icy water gave her system the shock she needed.

\* \* \*

Frank couldn't get the image of Zoe's sleep-tumbled hair out of his head. Coupled with the shadow of her nipples and pussy beneath her nightgown, the sight nearly brought him to his knees. If she hadn't darted away when she had, Frank would have been going at her like she was a dog in heat. He'd stumbled along behind her, intent on sharing information, but knowing he was a hair-trigger away from letting her know exactly how he felt. Somehow his common sense kicked in. His body screamed betrayal.

Agony was sitting at the kitchen table with a hard-on while he watched the hallway for her to join him. He'd managed to keep himself in check for the last six months. Now that he'd decided to finally make a more aggressive move, his baser male had leaped to the forefront. Considering what they were about to do, one wrong

## TO DIE FOR

move and he could royally fuck everything up.

There was little choice. Xavier Sanchez was a killer and needed to be brought down fast. Permanently would suit Frank, too. Carson had given him the breakdown on Xavier's record earlier. It broke his heart to hear about the abuse Zoe had suffered living with the man. He knew she'd call herself young and naïve. No... stupid. The word grated on his nerves. There was nothing stupid about Zoe White. The fact this little pipsqueak had managed to manipulate... *imprison*... such a wonderful woman...

Frank pulled in a breath to calm himself. Zoe had found the courage to fight, to do the right thing, for herself and the baby that never came to be.

*Brave woman.*

“Frank?”

He jerked at the sound of her voice. She stood before him, wrapped in a thick blue robe and towel-drying her long black hair. His brain shut down. All the blood rushed southward. At some point, he realized his jaw hung open. He snapped it shut and covered his lapse by closing the paper.

“Coffee's still hot.” A stupid statement since it'd clearly been hot fifteen minutes before. “I also ran out earlier for fresh bagels. No scones. I know how much you love those so—”

“Frank... about last night...”

The last thing he wanted to talk about was last night. Thinking about her writhing against him, curves all soft, warm, and welcoming, would be a death knell to what little control Frank possessed. It was going to be difficult enough as it was.

“Forget about it.” He flicked his fingers through the air. “We'll pretend it never happened.” *I'll be dreaming about it for weeks.* God... weeks... no way he'd last that long. “We need to talk.



## TO DIE FOR

Coffee? Bagel?" He started to push away from the table to get both for her.

Zoe waved him back down. "I think I know my way around my own kitchen."

Frank thanked the stars because there was no way he would have been able to hide his erection. He watched her fill a mug and grab a bagel from the bag on the counter, then ripped his gaze away from her breasts when she sat across from him.

"So what're we talking about?" she asked.

His lust subsided. Having a plan was one thing; getting Zoe to agree... "I talked to Carson this morning. They've had no luck finding Sanchez."

"His mother would hide his ass." She pinched off a bite of bagel. "He might be scared enough to run to her for help as a last resort."

He frowned. "I'm sure they've got her staked out. What do you mean 'as a last resort'?"

She shrugged. "Woman is seriously scary. Insanely violent. Her size makes me look like Tinkerbell. Xavier would only go running to her for help if he had no other choice. He wants his *mamacita* to think he's a good boy."

"Or else?" Because there was an *or else* implied.

"Exactly." She tapped the air.

Frank made a mental note to give the info to Carson. "Anyway..." He rubbed suddenly sweaty palms on his jeans. "The captain called. They have a plan to draw Sanchez out."

Zoe dropped her bagel and lifted her hands. "Oh, let me guess. It involves me."

*Definitely not a stupid woman.* He let his silence reply.

"No," she said.

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He reached across the table and grabbed her hand to hold her in place... in the event she was getting ready to bolt. "Just listen."

She slipped free, hooked her coffee mug, and sat back. "Go."

Go as in leave? Or go on with the plan? Frank risked the latter. At this point, he had nothing to lose.

"You and I are going to go into the precinct together. Reporters are camped out waiting for a press release of some kind. They want to talk to the woman who helped save DiCarlo. We're going to put you before the cameras to talk to them. We'll flaunt our relationship."

"We don't have a relationship."

That stung. "We're going to make everyone think we're a couple."

Her chin came up, nose twitched, pupils dilated, and her cheeks pinkened. He wanted to leap the table and fuck her right on the spot.

"No."

"It'll draw him out."

"No. Right now there's little chance he'll recognize me on the street. I've changed somewhat since he knew me. If I go on the air, he'll know for sure who I am once he hears my voice."

"We'll protect you. I'll protect you. It's only a matter of time anyway. You said so yourself. He knows where you work, can find out where you live. This way we have control of the situation. Seriously, how much could you have changed in five years?"

Zoe stood so fast her chair toppled over. Frank hurried after her. She reached the spare room in seconds, flinging the door against the wall so hard it cracked the plaster. He watched her rip through box after box until she found what she was looking for. Her robe had fallen open, barely held by the flimsy belt. It wasn't

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her body that held him captive this time. It was her shaking hands, the anger twisting her features.

She whipped around, a box of photos in her hands. She dumped them at his feet without warning. “*This* is why. This is what I looked like the day I left the bastard.”

Dumbstruck, Frank stared down at a stranger. At a woman more skeleton than substance, a heartbeat away from being a ghost. He wanted to cry. He wanted to rage. He wanted to punch another hole in the wallboard. Most of all, he wanted to drag Zoe against him and promise nothing and no one would ever hurt her again.

“Please,” he managed to say, “you’ve got to help us do this. You’ve got to help us bring him in.” Frank looked up then, gaze locked onto his beautiful Zoe. “Because, God help me, if I find this bastard... I’ll kill him.”

Her chin quivered. Hell, he was pretty sure his might have, too. He took a step toward her, intending to close what felt like miles between them and pull her into his arms. His cell phone had other ideas.

Running curses through his head, Frank answered and snapped out his name.

\* \* \*

Zoe pulled in a deep breath when Frank strode from the room. Clearly, the call was from work, and she prayed it was news they’d caught Xavier. She listened to the low rumble of his voice and knelt to shuffle the pictures together. Frank would never know the emotional toll it’d taken to share these with him. Her sister had wanted them destroyed, begged Zoe to do so. Zoe kept them for the reminder of what she’d been, what she never wanted to be

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again—a victim. Yet here she was now, hiding and fearful. What happened to making a stand?

She stuffed the photos back into the cardboard container, then closed the door on the mess. Tugging her robe closed—she'd given Frank quite a show, hadn't she?—she returned to the kitchen. Frank stood at the window, back rigid with tension. He spun around, freezing her in place with one look. One thumb punch ended the call. He kept the phone clutched in his grip.

“There's been another murder. A couple. Apparently renters of yours.”

Zoe closed her eyes against a rush of tears.

“How many fucking houses to you and your sister own, Zoe?”

“Ten,” she squeaked out. “Alicia and I buy repos, renovate them, and resell. The market's been bad, so we rent them out.”

“He's hunting you, Zoe.” His voice was softer now, ready to cajole her into agreeing to his plan.

“How did he...” A stupid question. A determined person could find anything on the Internet.

“It wouldn't surprise me to learn he's already been to your parents' and sister's house looking for you. Failing that... He's sniffing out a trail for you.”

One would think Xavier would realize Zoe was protected, too. “He's baiting me,” she realized. “Trying to get me to come to him.”

His body heat surrounded her. Zoe opened her eyes to find Frank so close all she had to do was lean and she'd be pressed against him.

“We need your help.” Frank brushed his fingers over her shoulder. “I'll protect you.”

“He'll know your name; come after us. It'll put your girls in

*TO DIE FOR*

danger, too.”

Long fingers cupped her arm, drawing her across that minuscule distance. “We won’t give him my name. I’ll just be a presence in the background, letting the world think we’re a couple. The guy’s got a hair-trigger. We’ll have him in custody by the end of the day.”

He pulled her hands to his chest. The thud of his heartbeat gave Zoe strength.

“The other renters will be protected?”

“All we need is the addresses.”

*If it isn’t already too late.*

“All right,” she finally replied. “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you.”

He should have released her now and made whatever phone calls were necessary to set this all in motion. But one hand still held her hand to his chest; the other pressed against the center of her back. Nothing separated them now except clothing.

“I’m going to kiss you, Zoe.” His voice whispered over her lips.

*Oh, no. No.* Blood roared in her ears. Her knees trembled. “I... I wish you wouldn’t.” *Liar.*

“Why?” Both arms locked around her.

God help her, Zoe melted into the embrace. “You... you don’t understand.”

“I understand plenty.”

His erection pulsed into her belly, stoking the fire building there. She tried to tell herself it was a physical reaction to their nearness, nothing more. Tried to tell herself they needed to appear to be a couple in public and, therefore, this innocuous kiss would ease them into the illusion. Tried to throw out a thousand other

## *TO DIE FOR*

excuses that all explained why Frank Ludwig held her so wonderfully tight.

But then his mouth covered hers, his tongue slipped past her parted lips, and that fire turned into an inferno. Her body came alive for the first time in years. A little whimper melted her more into him. His hold tightened, the kiss claiming her soul. She wrapped her arms around his neck. One hand clamped over her ass, anchoring her in place, while he rasped his hard-on over her stomach. The other hand wandered to the knot on her robe belt, loosening it as if it were nothing.

Her body quivered when he parted the folds, then jerked with the first touch of his hand to her waist. He deepened the kiss, squeezed her ass, and tickled his fingers up her ribs.

His cell phone startled them both, breaking the seal of their mouths.

Frank's muttered, "Fuck," said it all. He stomped to the counter to answer the call.

Zoe clutched her robe closed and ran to her bedroom. Back braced on the door, she sank to the floor. Fingers dived for her aching pussy. It didn't take much to make her come.

"Zoe?"

She jumped at the sound of his voice on the other side of the door.

"Go away." Her head buzzed from the orgasm. She half-expected him to barge in, or at least try the doorknob. Disappointment weighed down her heart when she heard his footsteps retreat and the bathroom door close.

Where the hell was her head? People were dead, and all she could think about was coming, about Frank's body pressing her deep into the mattress, about burrowing so far under the covers

## TO DIE FOR

with him the world would implode and they'd never realize it.

*Lovestruck fool. Horny, lovestruck fool.*

Tears fell, fast and furious. Knees clutched to her chest, Zoe rested her cheek on top of them, slowly rocking while she cried. There was movement behind her—the door being pushed open.

“Don’t cry. Please don’t cry.” When had he returned, or had he ever left and she only imagined it? “Let me in, Zoe.”

She knew she shouldn’t, not as vulnerable as she felt, not as much as she wanted him. But she did, scooting far enough away to allow Frank to squeeze in. He folded his big body to the floor beside her, arms wrapping so tight around her the world beyond didn’t exist. Zoe curled into his chest, palms pressed to those rock-hard pecs. His heart beat as fast as hers. She liked that. She liked it a lot... too much.

Frank covered his hand over hers and rubbed his thumb gently into her palm. With her sigh, he lifted her fingers to his mouth and kissed them. She froze at his subtle yet sharp intake of breath. He could smell her pussy juices on her fingers. Her body went rigid while Zoe debated her method of retreat. She dared a glance at him from under her eyelashes. His eyes were closed, muscles tense. Shame overwhelmed her. Then he burrowed his nose against her fingers and inhaled.

Shivers raced to her toes. Frank’s soft groan let her know he’d felt every one. He licked her fingers to the tips, then sucked them into his hot mouth. Zoe was lost. Tension melted from her muscles. She fisted his shirt and dragged him down to the floor with her. Nipples and clitoris drew tighter with every suckle, wanting to crawl into his mouth for a taste of what his tongue was doing to her fingers. She closed her eyes and let pleasure have her... let Frank have her. If he wanted. She prayed he did.

## TO DIE FOR

He feathered his tongue down to her palm, tracing each line before moving to her wrist and gently sucking there, too. Her pussy clenched, thighs quivered. She spread them wider. Frank wasted no time filling the space. His hips fit to perfection, hard erection now wedged into the cleft of her body. His mouth was on the move again.

Zoe expected him to go after her breasts. Those were always a man's first target. He spread the edges of her robe apart. She watched the glazed look in his eyes as his gaze took her in, gasped when his tongue slowly mapped his lips. He molded his hands over her ribs, traced his thumbs along the underside of her breasts. Breath held, she waited for him to suck her nipple, then jerked when his tongue dived into her navel. A shaft of electricity speared her clit. One hand clutched his head; the other wadded the robe beneath her.

Frank swooped his hands to her hips, then down to her thighs. He was on the move once more, his target clear. She wanted to tell him he didn't have to do *that*. Wanted him to know she didn't think she'd like it, that she'd really never done that before, that...

"Oh, God!" she gasped, when his tongue traced her labia.

He groaned a response and nibbled her clit.

Oh, God, it was sweet! So sweet!

He took his time, teasing her clit to the bursting point, until Zoe thought she'd go mad if she didn't come soon. Her orgasm, when it finally came, turned her inside out. She shuddered against his mouth, thighs crushing the life out of his shoulders, nails digging deep into his skin. Then he was over her and she stared at him through lazy eyes. Zoe's scent was on his lips, his hard dick poised to take her. She'd been too lost in pleasure to notice he'd shoved his trousers down.



## *TO DIE FOR*

She grabbed the back of his neck and sealed their mouths. One thrust seated him to the hilt and filled her—hard, hot, big. Her pelvis rocked into him, demanding he give it up. Frank groaned and let loose, pounding her hard and fast across the rough carpet until her head butted against the dresser. He dug his fingers into her hips, holding her in place while he fucked her even harder. She locked her ankles around his waist, taking the thrash of his tongue and the beat of his cock. He yanked his head up, jaw clenched against climax. He growled and plunged deep, freezing as cum jetted out of him. Zoe had never felt like more of a woman than at that moment.

She held him close, dotting kisses to his cheek, his chin, his throat. Rubbing her hands over his shoulders. Feeling so much love it hurt.

Frank pulled in deep breaths. Warmth filled his eyes when he stared down at her. He smiled and dropped a kiss to her nose.

And, of course, his cell phone rang.

“Fuck!” He eased from her to answer and glanced down at his flaccid penis. “Fuck! I’m sorry, honey. I’m so sorry.” He scrambled to pull up his trousers as he stood, then fished his phone from his pocket and left the room.

So much for feeling like a woman.

## CHAPTER 4

Frank stood as he had earlier—staring out the kitchen window, hands braced on the edge of the sink. His cell phone lay on the kitchen counter, silent for the first time in thirty minutes. Zoe had given him the addresses of the houses she and Alicia owned, then listened to the steady rumble of his voice while he made and received one phone call after the other. She got a little adrenaline rush listening to him in work mode, though it was nothing compared to the rush of being beneath him, his cock pounding into her.

Zoe tried not to think about that. She'd thought too much about that already. They'd yet to talk about it and, as far as she was concerned, they weren't going to. He was sorry. She'd screwed up by dragging him to the floor. End of story.

## TO DIE FOR

In the time it had taken her to dress, fix her hair, and put on makeup, he'd poured the remains of the coffee into the monster thermal cup he always kept within hand's reach. The kitchen was more spotless than before he'd used it.

"You should pack an overnight bag with several changes of clothing just in case," he said without turning.

So much for nabbing Xavier before the end of the day. But she was one step ahead of him.

"Done. I'd planned on staying in a hotel for a couple of days. With you being gone..." Her heart ached already and her body was in misery.

"We'll be moving you to a safe house if this isn't resolved by the end of the day. Carson's making the arrangements now."

"Good." She'd be in safe hands... just not the hands she wanted to be safe in.

He glanced over his shoulder. "About what just happened between us—"

"Forget about it. We'll pretend it never happened." She mimicked his earlier dismissal, flicking her fingers through the air.

Frank grunted, whether for the word, the gesture, or both... In any event, he scowled.

"You said it yourself," she told him. "It'll change everything between us."

"Maybe it needs to change." Arms crossed, he turned to face her, braced against the counter. "If you're pregnant—"

*Huh? Oh... right... no condom.* "I won't be. And I'm clean, if that's what you're worried about." He didn't need to know she rarely had sex.

"I wasn't. I am, too. I'm very careful."

"Good to know."

## TO DIE FOR

He pushed away from the sink. “If you’re ready, we need to go. I’ll get your bag.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she’d get her own bag, but Zoe wasn’t in the mood to make an issue of it. If he wanted to be a gentleman, she’d let him. “I’ll grab my purse and your cup and meet—”

“At the front door.” He stared down at her, gaze sweeping her face with a mix of emotion that warmed her inside out. He reached for her cheek, then dropped his hand to his side. “Bad stuff can happen in a flash.”

He was right, of course. But then there were the bad things that built to explosive proportion, too, smacking you down when you least expected it.

“At the door. I won’t be stupid.” Once in a lifetime was enough.

“I wish I could promise the same thing. The fact is... I can’t think straight where you’re concerned. Case in point... forgetting to use a condom. It won’t happen again.”

*The sex or not using a condom?* He left her standing there, mouth agape, wondering what the hell he meant and too chicken to demand clarification.

\* \* \*

“It breaks the heart.” Carson tossed the case file on top of his overflowing basket. “Such a sweet woman. To think of the shit she went through. She’s one hell of a woman.”

Zoe was all that and more.

“Someone needs to catch this asshole before I do.” Carson took a slug from his Coke bottle. “Bet you feel the same way.”

## *TO DIE FOR*

“No sense lying about it.” Frank stretched out his legs and stared into space. All he could see was that picture of Zoe, so thin she was near death.

Carson snapped forward, forearms resting on the edge of his battered metal desk. “There was a third suspect in that convenience store robbery, but neither Sanchez nor Olivera admitted it. I checked out the video, for shits and giggles. The person’s just off camera. Looks like a boy, slight, raggedy dark hair, Hispanic. All three drew on the owner at the same time. I swear it looks like the shot came from the kid’s weapon.”

“Why would Sanchez and Olivera take the fall for another person?”

Carson turned his callused palms up. “Who knows? Family ties?” His chair squeaked as he leaned back. “Sanchez’s mother, Elena, is a hulk of a woman. Six feet tall, weighs between two hundred and two-fifty, and I swear it’s all muscle. Light skin Hispanic, black and silver hair piled high makes her look even bigger. Woman scared the piss out of me when we stopped by her place in Pacific Palisades.”

Carson didn’t scare easy.

“Navarro kept his hand over his jewels the entire time.” He snickered. “Can’t say I blame him. Woman could cut off a man’s nuts with a look. She carries herself like a queen... in an off-with-their-heads sorta way. I guess you’ve got to have balls of steel to come from nothing and build what she’s got. To start as a housekeeper and now have a chain of dollar stores throughout the west? Takes determination. But I sure as hell wouldn’t want to be working with her, much less living with her.”

Frank imagined how petrified a child would be, but that didn’t excuse Sanchez’s behavior. “Yeah, the guy’s got mommy issues.

## TO DIE FOR

It's not hard to connect the dots from his abuse to the abuse he inflicted. Zoe didn't deserve that. No woman, no *person*, deserves that kind of treatment." Her family had to have been frantic to get her away from him. Frank wondered how much Zoe hid from them.

"I know she's got to be scared to death." Carson bent a paperclip around his beefy index finger. "How'd you convince her to do this?"

"Told her I'd kill the man if I got my hands on him so it'd be best to make sure someone else got to him first and this was the best way to do that."

"You'd be surprised how many people feel the same way right now." He leaned back as far as the chair allowed and grinned. "She's lookin' real good today. Camera-ready and sharp. But then, the woman always looks hotter than the law allows."

Jealousy lifted the hairs on the back of Frank's neck. He tried to shrug it off. Zoe did look damn fine today. She carried her voluptuous curves with confidence. Today she'd worn light gray pants and steel-blue shirt with buttons so tiny he was certain they were designed to drive a man insane trying to get them open. There had to be a hundred of those tiny suckers hugging each other down the front of her shirt. The V-neck shared the barest hint of cleavage. Two-inch black heels thwarted his efforts to try for a peek, putting her closer to his six-two.

"She is a damn hot woman," Frank admitted. It'd taken what little willpower he had left to keep his hands to himself, not to mention his mouth and cock. Sex with her was an appetizer. He was ready for the full course... and dessert. The scent of her pussy lingered in his sinuses. All he wanted was more.

He shifted to hide a growing erection. "We about ready to get

## TO DIE FOR

this show moving?”

“Yep.” Carson slapped his desk and stood. “You get Zoe, and I’ll let the captain and chief know we’re up.”

\* \* \*

Zoe double-checked her makeup in the restroom mirror. She was as ready as she was going to be. Media Relations had prepped her, run the semblance of a script with her, and they’d rehearsed several times to chase jitters away. Her insides didn’t cooperate, but she conceded that might have more to do with facing Frank in a few minutes rather than reporters.

They hadn’t said a word on the drive over. Lingering sexual tension prickled the air and every single hair on her body. She’d kept her gaze focused out the passenger window to hide her flushed cheeks. If she closed her eyes, Zoe felt his body on her, in her, and wanted him so badly she thought she’d go insane.

Everything *had* changed.

Zoe pressed her lips to seal the red color and dropped the lipstick tube into her purse. Her appearance was as good as it was going to get. In fact, she’d never looked better.

*Good sex will do that for you.*

She smoothed the silk blouse over her torso. It hinted at her curves rather than broadcast them—something Zoe thought she preferred until this morning.

He hadn’t touched her boobs. Why? Didn’t he like them? Were they too big? Too saggy? Boob grabbing was the number one move of all men. Kiss and grab. Always. Not Frank. He’d gone right for her—

Her stomach plummeted, right to that place where his tongue

## TO DIE FOR

had played. Zoe gripped the sink, afraid her shaky legs wouldn't hold her. Her cheeks were pink, nipples erect and plainly visible behind the flimsy barriers. Hard-to-miss beacons.

She started when the restroom door pushed open a crack.

"It's time," Frank said, then shut the door.

Zoe pulled herself together, gave her reflection the once-over, then flicked open the top button. That should get his attention. If not, the hard-core lieutenant from Media Relations would mention the lapse. Failing all that, Zoe would rebutton before they went before the cameras.

She was flirting with something, just wasn't sure what. Part of her wanted to take a giant step back to yesterday morning before everything had gone to hell. The woman in her wanted Frank to drag her off someplace private for more loving... and to notice her boobs.

Clutching her purse strap in an iron fist, Zoe strode from the restroom. Frank leaned against the wall across from the door. He'd changed into a navy blue pinstripe suit—his courtroom attire. Her mouth watered at the sight, fingers itching to unknot the gray and burgundy striped tie and nibble his Adam's apple.

His gaze fell right to her cleavage. Victory was hers. She indulged in a below-the-belt glance of her own. Victory there, too.

Theo Garcia's snicker shattered the moment. "Looks like somebody got lucky last night."

Frank rounded on his partner, stopping a step away from shoving the smaller man against the wall. "Shut the fuck up. There's a lady present." He towered over Garcia. "Not that you'd recognize one."

Garcia lifted his palms. "Chill, man. I didn't realize—"

"Now you do. And keep your baby browns off her chest, perv."



## TO DIE FOR

You've got drool running down your chin."

Garcia wiped his fingers over the corners of his mouth. Zoe was fairly certain it was more to hide a smirk than to remove supposed spittle. "Sure thing, partner. Hands and eyes off. Got it."

Frank gave him a single nod, took a back step, and gently cupped Zoe's elbow. "Your blouse is unbuttoned."

From the corner of her eye, she watched Frank button his suit jacket, while she did the same with her blouse. His hand slipped to the center of her back seconds before the two of them stepped into controlled chaos.

Lieutenant Valerie Katz motioned them into place behind the police commissioner and chief. Introductions and small talk followed while Katz took the lead to brief reporters. Zoe envied the woman's ease, her no-nonsense French twist, her crisp black suit that didn't dare crease.

The doors swung open. Zoe thought she was going to be sick. Frank's wide palm at her back kept her steady and secure, but also allowed other doubts to creep in. She wondered if embarrassment had fueled his anger at Garcia. If he sorely regretted the line they'd crossed and was trying to put things back the way they were. Wondered if his emotions were as conflicted as hers. She never should have teased him with a cleavage shot. It was a dirty move well beneath the standards she'd tried to set for herself.

All too soon she stood before the microphone. She clutched her hands and leaned into the big palm that never left her back. Cameramen jostled for a good shot. Somewhere, Xavier was watching, listening. It was time to bait the trap.

"How did it feel to save a man's life?" a man in front asked.

*The first stupid question.* "As trite as it might sound, I was doing what any human being would do under the circumstances.

## TO DIE FOR

Part of my job is to ensure the safety of the officers on duty. Generally, that means passing along information rapidly. This was a unique situation. Officer DiCarlo had the presence of mind to keep the radio open, and I had the presence of mind to help him hang on. I relied on instinct and training, as I'm sure he did. I do regret that things went down too quickly to save Officer Tolliver."

"How do you feel about having been threatened as a result?" someone in back yelled out.

*Stupid question number two.* Zoe bit back the urge to ask, *How the hell do you think it feels?* "I have every confidence the police officers with whom I work will protect me. It has unnerved me, but that's the extent to which I'll allow it to interfere with my life." They didn't need to know she was tempted to shove all her cardboard boxes in the back of her truck and head for parts unknown until this was over.

"We hear this killer is a man you know," a woman asked. "A former boyfriend who recognized your voice, which is clearly distinctive."

"Thank you. Was there a question in there?" Laughter tittered through the group. Zoe didn't give the woman time to respond. "Unfortunately, that's true. It's a cruel coincidence, a random event. A bad mistake from my past."

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"I would not. It has no bearing on the case. It has no bearing on my life. I've moved on."

"I presume you mean personally," a man spit out. "How does your boyfriend feel about all this? Afraid for you, of course. But how has this affected your normal routine? What measures are you two taking to protect yourselves until this suspect is caught?"

Zoe swept her hands toward Frank. "Ask him yourselves."

## *TO DIE FOR*

All eyes shifted to Frank. She felt her face heat. They were all probably wondering how someone like her could get someone like Frank.

“That would explain why you’re confident the police will protect you.” The statement came from within the crowd. Since no question came with it, only more titters, Zoe ignored it.

“What’s on your agenda for today?” the first reporter asked. “Business as usual?”

“More or less,” she replied. “We do have jobs to do. Later today, we’ll be visiting Officer DiCarlo at the hospital. Lieutenant Katz will brief you on his status and continued efforts to apprehend the suspect. Thank you all for your time.”

Zoe stepped away. Frank’s arm came around her shoulder and drew her back into the building. She waited until they turned the corner in the hallway to let out the breath she was holding and sag against the wall.

“I hear you on that one.” Frank braced his arm over her head. “You were great. Oops”—he tapped her top button—“open again.”

When Zoe glanced down, he flicked her chin.

“Made you look.”

She couldn’t help herself. She giggled.

Frank rested his fingers under her chin. “There’s that smile I love so much.”

She glanced down to hide a sudden bout of shyness.

He tickled his finger down her throat until it rested in the V of her neckline. “You tempt a starving man.” He traced the edge of her blouse. “And I don’t mean Theo.”

“Don’t tease me,” she replied breathlessly. Her eyes locked onto his mouth. Nipples were hard little rocks again, wanting that wandering finger to wander a bit lower.

## TO DIE FOR

“Oh, I’m dead serious.” He leaned in, lips parted.

“The hallway... people will see,” she gasped.

“Hardly a crime, honey.” Nevertheless, he eased away, giving Zoe the breathing room her lungs needed.

“I need to get to work.” A valid excuse... for both of them.

“I’ll walk with you,” he said.

“I can walk myself.” If she could manage to walk at all. Muscles were nothing but jelly at the moment.

“All right.” His scowl said otherwise. “I’ll see you later.” He kissed her quickly, before Zoe could see it coming, before she could brace herself for the over-the-hill-too-fast feeling. Then he was walking away, wiping her lipstick off his mouth with his thumb.

She pulled in a breath to steady her nerves, tightened her arms around her midriff, then turned toward the comm room... and right into Joanie Robertson. She’d never seen the policewoman’s eyes so wide. Her mouth gaped like a koi sucking food pellets.

“Oh, my God, you *are* a couple?” she shrieked.

Zoe leveled a stare that would melt an iceberg. “Why would you find it so hard to believe?”

“How long has this been going on?” The little bitch had the nerve to try to look down her nose at Zoe.

“Long enough,” she said. Long enough to break her heart when the pretending was over.

“That explains why he never gave me a second glance.”

Never mind the fact Robertson spread her legs for every man in sniffing distance. Zoe knew Frank didn’t stick his dick in every pussy that crossed his path. She let stone-faced silence respond to Robertson’s comment.

“But... but...”

## TO DIE FOR

Zoe skirted Robertson and her butts. The whole precinct would know in minutes Frank had kissed her in the hallway... if they didn't suspect something already from their interaction with Garcia, because he'd never keep his mouth shut. She'd allow herself the fantasy and awestruck wonder it inspired in others for now. Live in the moment. They'd realize soon enough it was all an act to catch Xavier. She could hear the gossip now. *I knew they couldn't be a couple. What could Ludwig possibly see in her?* And world order would be restored.

"There you are." Valerie Katz waylaid Zoe halfway to the comm room. "You were magnificent. Stunning. Statuesque. Professional. Your voice alone mesmerized the crowd. I'd give my eye teeth to sound and look like you."

The praise was overkill in Zoe's opinion. She wasn't sure she trusted it. "Thank you."

"Stations are clamoring for one-on-one interviews." She hooked her arm through Zoe's, trying to lead her where she wanted.

Zoe dug her heels in, refusing to budge. "Interviews?"

Katz released her, now trying to block Zoe into the wall. Again, Zoe maneuvered away and into the middle of the hall.

"Yes. We're going with Channel 5. This is wonderful exposure for the department. Great PR. You're the new hero of the day, and we want to take advantage of all the good press we can get."

"What happened to catching Xavier?" She didn't like the sound of this at all.

"Everything we have planned will only continue to draw him out." Katz brushed it aside with a wave of her hand. "Calls are pouring in with possible sightings." She scrunched her pixie nose. "It's probably not a good idea for you to be fielding those calls

## TO DIE FOR

anyway. If you pick up and it's him, that defeats the purpose of all this, doesn't it? He'll know where you are; know how he can access you directly. We want him in the open where we can grab him."

She supposed that made sense. The very idea of personal interviews made her skin crawl. Zoe's head pounded at the thought.

"I'll concede it does make sense for me not to work comm, but what about Frank? Surely he has other—"

Fingers fluttered again. She didn't realize how annoying Katz's habit was or how often she made the gesture until now. "He'll be able to do his job. This doesn't concern him. We feel we can adequately provide protection. Besides..."

*Again with the fingers?* Zoe wanted to break them.

"... as your presumed boyfriend, he wouldn't be with you twenty-four-seven, now would he? This is a more plausible scenario. He's been briefed... and he does have more important things to do than to play boyfriend. He's served his purpose."

Nothing like a knife thrust to the ribs. Her live-for-the-moment fantasy was over before it'd really begun. She could already hear the snickers behind her back.

Zoe swallowed the lump in her throat.

Katz motioned her down the hall. "Come. We're on a tight schedule. Nothing to fear. I've got your back."

She nearly called the woman on her lie, but was too choked up to utter a word. Blinking away a rush of unwanted tears, Zoe blindly followed Katz.

## CHAPTER 5

“We’re partners, right?”

Frank didn’t like any conversation that started with this question. It meant Theo was up to something. He leaned back as far as his rickety chair allowed, wiggled his pen between his fingers, and studied the guy’s feigned innocence across their desks. “What about it?”

Theo leaned in on his forearms. “You’re being backdoored.”

“Who? When? Why?” he spit out.

“Valerie Katz. Now. Zoe,” Theo shot back. “Just found out when I passed the breakroom and saw the news re-running an interview with Zoe from earlier today. Apparently, she’s spent the day making news appearances and visiting domestic violence shelters.”

## TO DIE FOR

Frank twirled the pen through his fingers, damning Katz to seven levels of hell. He blamed himself for not checking in on Zoe throughout the day. But every time he was near her, Frank got the hard-on from hell and all he could see was Zoe writhing beneath him. Keeping his hands off her took a will he didn't possess. So he let himself be chained to his desk and the mound of paperwork that he'd neglected, catching up prior to vacation while he anticipated Katz's next direction. The bitch had moved without him. He should call Zoe, make sure she was all right.

"I did a little checking for you." Theo eased back. "Once it came out that Zoe has a black belt, Katz decided to make her LAPD's poster model for domestic violence."

He didn't know Zoe had a black belt. His pride for her martial arts accomplishment was usurped by the knowledge her biggest secret was now being trotted out to the world—that she'd found herself trapped in an abusive relationship. Frank could hear Katz's spiel right now. She would have played on Zoe's conscience, somehow convinced her the department would benefit, other women would benefit, and each move would drive Sanchez into the open. Why he'd been excluded...

"You scare me when you don't speak."

Theo scratched at his five o'clock shadow. Frank knew he probably didn't look much better. He kept a Norelco in his desk drawer to help keep sharp. Theo could give a shit. Frank didn't know what Theo expected him to say now. He was so fucking pissed he couldn't see or think straight. He knew Katz's agenda didn't include thorough protection for Zoe.

"They're on their way to the hospital now. DiCarlo's ready for visitors. There'll be an"—he made quotation marks in the air—"impromptu meeting with his wife. Reporters on hand, of course."



## TO DIE FOR

*Of course.*

“Then Katz is dragging Zoe to the funeral home for a condolence call on Tolliver’s widow and parents. That’s fucked up.”

The whole thing was fucked up. He snapped upright. The pen flew across the desks, landing in Theo’s lap. Theo didn’t budge, just stared up when Frank stood.

“Want me to come with you?” he asked.

“Nope.” Frank snagged his razor from the drawer, then slammed it shut. “One of us needs to have a job by the end of the shift, and I can’t guarantee that’s going to be me.” He gave the man a nod. “Appreciate what you did.”

“No problem. Catch ya later. Enjoy the vacation.” He grinned. “Tell those pretty daughters of yours Theo says hi.”

It was a familiar, comfortable taunt. Kate and Emma ate up Theo’s harmless flirtations. Frank jabbed a finger his way. “You stay the fuck away from my girls.”

Theo snickered and leaned back, fingers laced behind his head. “They’re almost eighteen. Can’t watch ’em all the time. Remember that next week in Palm Springs. Unless you’re determined to lose your job.”

“Just committed to protecting what’s mine.”

He winced. “Word to the wise, buddy. Careful how you phrase that around Zoe.”

*Good point.*

“I hate to tell you this, but... ” Theo’s resigned sigh brought him to his feet. “Valerie told Zoe that you’d served your purpose and had better things to do than play boyfriend to her.”

Rage blanked Frank’s thoughts. He was standing by his car before he realized he’d taken a step. Theo hooked his shoulder

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before he could unlock the door.

“I’ll drive.” Theo wrapped his hand over Frank’s, folding Frank’s fingers into a loose fist, the keys tucked inside. “Losing your job is one thing, but going down for murder is another.” He nudged his shoulder. “Come on. We’ll use the department’s gas.”

Frank didn’t argue.

\* \* \*

Valerie Katz ran on caffeine, adrenaline, and bullshit. Zoe had her fill before her first interview that morning. Manners kept her patient on the surface. Underneath, she seethed. Katz had her own agenda, and it wasn’t protecting Zoe or catching Xavier. It wasn’t about LAPD image either, though she put up a good front. Katz wanted the spotlight focused on her. Her cultured manners hinted of a life of high society, wealth, and privilege. Her tactics said something else entirely... and it wasn’t something nice.

Zoe had watched her metamorphosis from locked-down police lieutenant to resume building career woman with each mile they put between themselves and headquarters. Zoe suspected the rumors she’d heard about Valerie were true. She craved and aggressively pursued political office, but claimed she refused to gain it unless it was on her own merits, not those of her congressman father. Whatever her goal, Katz had no compunction about stepping over anyone or anything to get what she wanted. She was young for her rank—not much older than Zoe—and as the day progressed, Zoe suspected more than merit had placed her in her current position. She’d come too far and too fast for someone so young.

Black suit changed to red. She lost the French twist and fluffed

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her shoulder-length blonde hair into bed-tousled waves. A fresh layer of makeup defined sharp cheekbones and made her dark brown eyes stand out. All of this while an officer drove them to the studio. The final touch to Katz's new ensemble was three-inch red stiletto heels that gave her the illusion of height. Zoe got that message loud and clear—Katz wouldn't be overshadowed by her charge.

Somehow Zoe suspected Media Relations didn't have a clue about the depth of Katz's ambition or that she'd summarily dismissed the protection detail assigned to Zoe. She'd cited the phalanx of reporters as protection enough. She also ignored Zoe's concerns about having spied Xavier in the crowd. Never bothered to look.

Each time Zoe thought she saw him, Xavier ducked away. It scared the piss out of her. Everywhere they went, there he was. The hospital was no exception. He lingered on the periphery of the crowd, shooting her a smirk before fading into the growing shadows.

His hands were deep in his jacket pockets, hinting at a weapon. Shouting out wasn't an option. Zoe would be putting innocent bystanders at risk. But Xavier was bolder now, ready to make a move, and they'd be headed to the funeral home for a condolence call on Tolliver's family after they finished visiting DiCarlo here.

"There's one final stop I want to make." The staccato rap of stilettos clicking on the floor bored a hole through Zoe's head. It was a wonder there weren't gouges in the tile. "There's a Right To Life meeting tonight. We'll go there. You lost a child, no thanks to that man. Granted it was a miscarriage and his forcing you into an abortion would carry more weight, but they'll run with it anyway."

Zoe's last straw. "Stop." She jerked to a standstill, forcing Katz

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and her Ken-doll assistant Josh Douglas to halt. Katz scowled. Josh held his breath.

“What?”

*What now* was implied. It snapped that last hold Zoe had on her patience. She stepped into Katz’s space, forcing the woman to look up... because she sure as hell refused to back away.

“I’m telling you I saw Xavier again. He was on the edge of the crowd when we arrived. He smirked at me and ducked away.” Zoe poked her finger in Katz’s face. “You do something now.”

A long-suffering sigh followed. “Check it out.” A head jerk sent Josh on his way. “Could we move on? We’re on a tight schedule.” She continued down the hall, expecting Zoe to follow.

“No, we’re not. We’re done. I’m done.” She dug her cell phone from her purse as she started in the opposite direction. “I’ll take care of this myself. If you won’t call for help, I will.”

“Don’t you dare!”

Katz’s heels clicked on the slick tile behind Zoe. A squeal jerked Zoe around. Katz’s eyes rounded in fear, arms windmilled. Zoe grabbed for her and missed. Her head hit the floor and bounced, then hit again. *Like a bowling ball hurled down a lane.* Katz’s eyes fluttered close; her body went limp.

Zoe knelt beside her. “Lieutenant Katz. Valerie.” She patted her cheek, felt for a pulse and found it strong and steady.

“What did you do?” Josh skidded to the floor next to her. “Get help! Go get help! I can’t leave her. I just can’t leave her. Valerie... baby... wake up!” He cradled her body, uncaring if he caused her further injury. Tears poured down his cheeks.

Zoe hurried to the entrance, where she knew security and the receptionist could alert the hospital of Katz’s medical needs.

Within minutes, they whisked Katz to the emergency room.

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Josh was a blubbering mess, reporters swarmed ER, and Zoe was on her own. She sneaked into the nearest family restroom and called 9-1-1.

Relief trickled through her tense muscles afterward. Help was on the way. Maybe even Frank.

Leaning against the door, she closed her eyes and tried to will away those emotions. Not thinking about him today had been impossible. She measured his every word and action, wondering if any of it had been real or merely part of the game. Of course, Alicia had seen the earlier news brief and had questions about Frank. Zoe dodged them during their brief conversation, using Katz's schedule as an excuse not to talk. She knew once she started explaining Frank to Alicia, tears wouldn't be far behind. Her sister could know she was a lovesick fool later when the world wasn't watching. Zoe would deal with those insane feelings while Frank was gone next week. With luck, they could put this all behind them, overlook the sex, and return to the camaraderie they'd enjoyed once he got back.

A knock at the door shattered her privacy.

"I need you out here." Josh's voice shook.

Resigned to consoling him and having to face reporters on her own, Zoe sighed and opened the door... into her worst nightmare.

Back to the wall, Xavier pressed the barrel of a .40 caliber under Josh's chin. Sweat mingled with Josh's tears. Xavier grinned. The crowd of personnel, reporters, and patients watched, frozen in fear. Her purse plopped to the floor, the sound loud in the eerie silence.

"Good hunt, *chica*." Xavier's *he-he-he* dredged up ancient horror. "But I'm tired of playin' games."

Help was on the way. All Zoe had to do was stall him. Surely

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one of those reporters had a camera running. The situation would be breaking news. She'd appeal to Xavier's vanity... get him to share his side of the story.

Zoe lifted her palms, slowly fanning the air. "You don't want to do this, Xavier. It's not you. Not a gun." No, fists and knives were his style. He got off on bruising, loved the way skin parted under a razor sharp blade. He loved torture, physical and emotional. A handgun ended the thrill too quickly, but he'd content himself on the emotional trauma a fully-loaded weapon wrought.

"Let the man go, Xavier. He's done nothing to you. We all know it's me you want. You found me fair and square. I'll go willingly." If she could get him to lower the weapon, get him isolated and try to take him down...

*Help is on the way.*

Tiny black eyes bored into hers, judging the weight of her promise. Zoe held steady, willed him to let Josh go, to take his finger off the trigger.

"You got fat," he accused.

"I eat too much." Zoe swallowed bile. "You always said I needed discipline. Without you..." She dared to touch his arm. "Let him go. It's me you want. It's always been me. You always told me that. You can have me."

"Come here, bitch," he snarled.

Zoe took small steps, making the clock tick out.

Xavier bared his teeth, flung Josh away, and grabbed a hank of her hair. "Kick off those fuckin' heels. I don't need you towering over me. We both know who's the boss."

She slipped her feet free, but was still taller than him. That hardly mattered since he was armed. The gun barrel was hot against her cheek, as if recently fired. She could feel its imprint

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branding her skin. Trying to disarm him wasn't an option, not with so many innocent people nearby. One wild shot, one stray bullet...

"I should cut you now, bitch. Right in front of everyone," he said through that clenched jaw. "You deserve it for what you did to me. You ruined everything." He tightened his grip and shook her head.

Zoe caught movement from the corner of her eye. So did Xavier. He whipped his handgun toward a security guard and squeezed the trigger without warning. Screams drowned out the man's fall. Blood spread over his gray uniform, soaking his stomach. An ER nurse dropped next to him, shoving gauze pads over the wound with little care for her own safety.

"Xavier, there are children here." Zoe's voice trembled. "Let them go. Remember when you were little and afraid. Children... little children... afraid."

"No one goes!"

*Think. Think.* "Not even us?" she tried. "Don't you want to be alone with me? Take your time. If we don't leave now..." She left the rest unsaid. Surely he'd have realized the police were on the way by now.

He pressed against her, rubbing his erection over her hip. "I like that idea." He jerked his head toward Josh. "Give her your keys."

The man didn't hesitate. Zoe caught them against her chest.

"Move!" He waved the people to one side.

Keeping his back to them, Xavier edged toward the automatic doors. They hissed open. Zoe caught a flash of red dancing over her face.

*Sniper.*

The second her brain processed the word, Xavier jerked to one

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side and fell. His weapon clattered across the floor. The small crowd screamed and scattered to avoid it. Blood spread over the rubber mat from the head wound. Zoe stared, watching the automatic doors open and close over his body.

She glanced at the blood splattered on her blue silk blouse, felt it wet on her face. Strong arms wrapped around her. *Frank.*

“It’s okay, honey. You’re okay.” He shook more than she did. Shock caught up with her quickly.

“Take me home, Frank. God, please take me home,” she cried. “I can’t stand the smell of him on me. I want him off me. I want him off me now.”

He tucked her under his arm. No... *lifted* her in his arms, high, tight, and secure against his chest, and carried her into the ER. Zoe clung to him, gaze locked onto his clean-shaven jaw. He kicked the double doors open to the interior of the emergency room and placed Zoe on the nearest gurney. Hospital staff said nothing. Zoe presumed they were treating other patients, trying to save the security guard’s life. Rings clattered overhead as Frank jerked the privacy curtain closed. Her vision darkened. She gripped the edge of the gurney to keep from falling face-first to the floor.

*Please, don’t let me faint.*

She heard drawers open, packages crinkle... all like she was underwater. Her breath caught when the first alcohol swab brushed her cheek. That’s when the shaking started.

“You’re going into shock, honey.” He ripped the blouse buttons open with the barest flick of his fingers, peeled the ruined blouse from her shoulders, and draped his suit jacket around her.

“Tuck your arms in.”

It took effort to move, but Zoe did so. Warmth and the scent of Frank surrounded her. “You... you’re still wearing your suit.”



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“Didn’t feel like changing.” He wiped the blood from her face, tossed the swab, and grabbed another.

She fisted the edges of his jacket closer. “My... my purse. Dropped it in the family restroom. Need to call. Let family know I’m okay.”

“Soon. Now’s not a good time. They don’t need to hear you upset.”

“Right.” Her head wobbled rather than nodded. “He’s dead, right?”

“Without a doubt.” Were his hands shaking, or was she so out of it the world tilted around her?

“She okay in there?”

Zoe jumped at the sound of Theo Garcia’s voice on the other side of the curtain.

“We’re getting there,” Frank replied. “Her purse is in the family restroom. Go grab it.”

“It’s part of the crime scene.”

Frank jerked the curtain to one side. “Go get the damn purse now.”

Chills ran up and down Zoe’s spine. Frank in hero-mode melted her heart, made her weak in the knees.

*Or maybe it’s shock.*

“Need to lie down.” Even as the words left her mouth, Zoe felt herself tilt toward the floor.

Frank caught her with one hand, cranked the back of the gurney up with the other, then eased her down. He tugged the edges of the jacket closer, combed his fingers through her hair, kissed her forehead.

“I’ve never been more scared in my life,” he whispered. “When that call came in—”

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“Here’s the purse.” Garcia thrust it through the curtain slit. Frank grabbed it and placed it beside her.

Odd how comforting that bit of security felt.

“This has already made the news,” Garcia said.

An ER filled with reporters would have ensured that.

“She’ll have to make a statement,” Garcia said.

“No.” She shook her head to add some weight to the word. “Not tonight. Please. Tomorrow. I want to go home. I need to go home.”

Zoe braced herself for argument. None came.

“Soon as you have your sea-legs, we’ll head back to the station for my car and I’ll take you home.”

“What?” She tried a smile. “You’re not going to sweep me into your arms again and carry me off?”

Frank’s eyes sparkled. “You bet.” He scooped her up and shouldered the curtain open.

Garcia’s arched eyebrows greeted them. “The reporters are going to love this. I’ll pull the car around to the ambulance entrance.”

## CHAPTER 6

Warm fingers curled around Zoe's knee, intruding sweetly into her dream.

"Wake up, honey. We're here."

She stretched a little and saw her house through bleary eyes. "That was quick."

"I drove slow so you could rest." Frank squeezed her knee, then cut the engine.

Zoe had changed into slacks, a camp shirt, and sneakers once they arrived at the station. Her blood-splattered blouse and skirt were with evidence. They could burn both for all she cared and her shoes along with them. She never wanted to see any of it again. A brief call to her family assured them she was well and headed home. Somehow, she'd managed to successfully dodge more

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questions about Frank. That was only going to last so long. Maybe by the time they cornered her, Zoe would have answers for them... and herself as well.

Frank leaned over the console. His breath tickled her neck. “Want me to carry you?”

She managed a little laugh. “Now you’re just showing off.”

“It’s not every day I get to be a hero.”

Zoe stared at those kissable lips and longed for the confidence to go for it. “I’d bet there are hundreds of people you’ve helped over the years who would disagree with that.”

“Hmm...”

His lips parted, setting her heart to racing. Zoe opened the car door before she gave in to the impulse to kiss him.

“Could you grab my overnighter?” she asked, exiting the vehicle. “I’ll get the door unlocked.”

She gave him little time to respond, darting up the sidewalk while she dug her keys from her purse. The security light over the porch greeted her, but all was dark inside. Fear crawled over her. Riveted in place, Zoe shoved the door open with the tips of her fingers. Motion sensitive lights clicked on. Frank’s body behind her gave Zoe the courage to step inside. She didn’t want to be alone tonight, didn’t want to be without him by her side.

“Stay with me tonight, Frank,” she whispered. “I promise I won’t try to seduce you.”

He slipped his arm around her waist, nuzzled his face into her neck. “Is it all right for me to seduce you?”

There were so many reasons why it was a bad choice—so many more why it was perfect. Zoe wanted him, needed him... loved him. It seemed obvious Frank felt something for her. His care of her tonight showed that. So this... was it so wrong?

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“Frank, I—”

“I’ve wanted you since the moment I laid eyes on you.” He lifted her hair and nibbled down the sensitive tendon along her neck. “I was so scared tonight when I heard... when I saw him...”

Zoe knew exactly how he felt. No one had been more petrified than she’d been. She needed affirmation of life, needed *him*. She wracked her brain for a clever response—*any* response—but Frank had already breached her shirt. Buttons fell open at his command. He pressed his hot palm over her midriff, nudged her cheek until she turned parted lips to him, then turned her around, anchored against his hard cock, and kissed her until her toes curled and her pussy wept.

Suddenly it didn’t matter why in the world a man like Frank would want someone like her. It only mattered that he did, and Zoe was going to take full advantage of the moment.

He broke the kiss, butting his forehead to hers. “We’re not doing this in the living room. I don’t want this to be a frantic fuck. Although, there is something to be said for going at it like rabbits in heat.” He clamped his hands over her ass and ground into her. “But I want you in bed. I want to take my time loving you, memorizing every inch of you inside and out. I want to be so far inside you that I can’t tell we’re separate people.”

She took a step away from him, reaching for his hands, lacing their fingers. Then she led Frank down the dark hallway and into her bedroom. She let go long enough to turn on the lamps. A man as fine as Frank shouldn’t be loved in the dark. Yet she hovered next to the bed, suddenly unsure. He stood just inside the doorway, slowly unbuttoning his shirt while his gaze swept her head to toe.

“Undress for me, Zoe. I want to see all of you. Make me ache so bad I come the second I touch you.”

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She laughed. “So much for that night of loving you hinted at.”

He grinned. “I’ll recover quick tonight.” He yanked his shirt off and tossed it aside. Her breath caught. There was no way she could ever hope to compare to him. Frank was solid muscle. She was... squishy, despite her martial arts’ prowess.

“Come on, honey.” He motioned to his chest. “My nipples are getting hard.”

“Indeed they are. You should see mine.”

“I’d love to see yours.”

Zoe cocked her head to one side. “Really? Because this morning you didn’t seem so interested.”

“No time.” He shrugged. “Beauties like those deserved to be worshipped. Sucked, kneaded... fucked.”

“Oh, Frank,” she gasped.

His muffled groan pierced through her, shooting more heat to places Zoe never realized existed. “Naked, honey. Now. Please. You’re killing me.”

She swallowed the last of her concerns and stripped. His gaze grew heavy-lidded, his breathing faster. A glimpse below the belt showed a cock primed for action. A small damp spot slowly spread.

Reaching to one side, Zoe grabbed the bedspread and yanked it down. “Your turn.” Giving him a little smirk, she added, “Unless you’d like me to play with my tits for you.”

His jaw dropped. “I take it back. You don’t need to touch me to have me coming.”

The man knew how to stroke a woman’s ego. Zoe crawled onto the bed. “Shall I wait for you to recover, or would you like me to start without you?”

He narrowed his gaze. “You’ll let me watch?”

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Zoe never realized sexual byplay could be so arousing. Frank wasn't the only one close to coming. "Perhaps." She dusted her fingers down the valley of her breasts, stopping right above her pubic mound. "Let me see you."

Frank pushed his shoes off. Zoe's eyes were focused on the ridge threatening to split his trousers. The tinkle of his belt buckle overshadowed the zipper's downward rasp. Frank didn't rush, but he also didn't dawdle. That gorgeous piece of meat sprung free, its milky eye looking right her way. Her heart thudded with every step forward Frank took. She reached for him when he knelt on the bed, one ankle poised to hook his calf and pull him between her legs. He let her capture him, yet kept his weight on his forearms. Long fingers toyed with her hair, combing it away from her temples, then looping that white strand around his index fingers.

"I'm going to be making some serious, very thorough love to you tonight." His voice was rough and raw, churning her insides to mush.

"I think I can honestly say no one's ever said that to me." She sucked in a breath when he rubbed his chest over her nipples.

"Then they were idiots, and I'm a very lucky man."

He had no idea, and Zoe was too afraid of spoiling the moment by professing love.

He started with her lips, kissing her down to her toes again. Each kiss varied, became unique, a signature all its own. Deep and slow that traced every part of her mouth. Quick nips that pulled her lips between his over and over. Kisses that made her gasp and silently beg for more.

Then Frank licked his tongue down her throat, circled the well at the base, and wandered the paths of her collarbones. Zoe cradled his head, knowing where he was headed and fighting the urge to

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push him down to her aching nipples. His hands reached her breasts first, dancing upward until his fingers touched her nipples.

She cried out and pushed into his touch. Frank rolled the hard flesh between thumb and forefinger, tugging until she was on the cusp of begging. He caught her breast again; fingers kneaded the oversensitive flesh. Then his lips plucked the stone-hard nipple.

Zoe moaned, digging her fingers into his scalp. He sucked her tits the same way he'd kissed her, thoroughly and without pause. Shafts of pleasure scored down her body, lodging in her close-to-bursting clit. She rocked her pelvis into his. Frank groaned and pressed his erection into her belly, fucking her navel. When he shifted to one side, she clutched his shoulders to hold him in place, only to freeze in sweet bliss when his hand cupped her pussy.

He parted her labia and ran his fingers through her juices. He circled his thumb over her clit, mouth relentlessly plundering her breasts. Zoe came in a rush of heat she knew singed every hair on her body. Frank gave her little time to come down. With the first spasms, he plunged his cock deep into her.

Orgasm had never been like this. He stroked hard and fast, keeping her on the top. She locked her ankles around his waist, dug her nails into those broad shoulders... and loved every single second.

“God, you’re sweet,” he said on a groan. “So... fucking... sweet.”

“Come, Frank.” She gasped. “Come inside me.”

His body tensed, jaw clenched, then slammed a final thrust deep. Hard shudders rocked through him. She felt the heat of his jism bathe her pussy. A deep groan came with his next plunge. Then another released him completely. Gasping for breath, heart pounding in time with hers, he sealed the moment with a kiss and



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slowly relieved her of his weight and drew her into the cove of his body.

Zoe rested her head on his chest. Fingers idly circled his nipple while his combed through her hair. She felt it the minute he fell asleep. His body melted into the bed, hand drifted from her hair, breathing deepened. It was more peace and comfort, shelter from the world. Zoe sighed, drew the emotions into her heart, and fell asleep.

\* \* \*

Frank breathed in the pleasure of spooning around Zoe. Dawn lightened the white lace curtains and the shades behind them that kept the world at bay. The last thing he wanted was to move. No... the last thing he wanted was to have her wake up and discover they weren't alone. He'd woken to the hum of news trucks outside about thirty minutes ago. He didn't have to look to know they lurked en masse, waiting for a glimpse of Zoe and a hoped-for news bite. She wouldn't be pleased. Frank was damn well pissed.

She stirred, soft ass rubbing against his morning erection. He'd been sorely tempted to give Zoe a good-morning wake up she'd never forget. The gentleman in him prevailed—barely.

“You’re poking me,” she mumbled, wiggling a little more.

“Yep.” He pushed against her. “And if you’d roll over, I’d poke you a little more.”

“Gee, you’re such a romantic.” She giggled and turned his way.

“Morning breath and all.” Frank pulled her atop him.

Zoe sank onto his cock without hesitation. He ground his pelvis, soaking in the heat of her tight pussy. She sat upright and combed her sleep-tousled hair up and over her shoulders. Frank

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reached for those big, beautiful breasts. Zoe gently pushed his hands away, replacing them with her own.

He'd died and gone to heaven. Her nipples were dark brown, puckered and hard, begging for a mouth. She toyed with them, plumped her breasts, offered the tips to him, all with her lower lip caught between perfect white teeth.

"You've got to be the sexiest woman in the world." He dropped his hands to her hips, holding on while he pumped his dick into her pussy. She was all his, and Frank hoped like hell he could keep her that way.

"Really?" she asked breathlessly. "What if I do this?" Her fingers crawled toward her clit.

No hint of a gentleman stepped up. He watched, transfixed, as she parted her pussy lips and her deep red clit thrust up. She flicked it around and around, driving him to the brink with each swipe.

"So," she gasped, "is this still making love... or are we... *fucking*?" The last came out a whisper that clenched his sac.

"God... damn, honey." He shot deep, letting her muscles wring him dry. He recovered his senses in time to see her come, and it was a beautiful sight.

Frank drew her to him in the afterglow. All too soon the buzz faded. Goose bumps raced over his skin when she slid to one side. He didn't want to let go... ever.

"I'm going to miss you. I swear there won't be a second this week I don't think about you."

Zoe tensed, then immediately relaxed. He wondered what he'd said wrong... or right.

"I'm going to miss you, too." She traced her finger around his nipple.

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Frank cupped her hand, tucking his thumb in her palm. “Come with me.”

She tensed again. This time she pulled away and sat up, hugging her knees to her chest. “We need to talk.”

Now *his* muscles locked up. This didn’t sound good. “It’ll be fun. The girls will love you.” He hoped. “Sure, it’s Palm Springs during spring break, but we’ll find lots of fun things to do.” At least that was the plan.

Zoe stared into space. “You’re older than me. We... we’re at different stages of our lives. Your daughters are almost eighteen.” She looked down at him. “I want kids one day, Frank. Can you say the same?”

No, he couldn’t, and the thought she might had never occurred to him. His stomach churned. He didn’t want to lose her, but this...

“How old do you think I am?” Yes... being defensive always works wonders, his conscience scolded.

Zoe glanced down at him. “Uhm... forty?”

“Thirty-five, thank you very much.” Almost thirty-six, but that wouldn’t work for his argument, whatever that argument was going to be.

“Sorry,” she muttered. “You’re a detective—”

“Right place, right time, and I’m damn good at what I do.”

“Your daughters—”

“Stacey and I were barely eighteen when they were born. We fucked up.” Boy, did they ever. “You’re twenty-eight. Seven years isn’t that much of an age difference.”

“How do you know my age?” Frown lines pulled her eyebrows closer.

Frank struggled for a response that wouldn’t reveal he’d checked her personnel file when they first met. “Your date of birth

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was in the old investigation report.”

“Hmph.” That made it pretty clear she didn’t believe him. “And how do you feel about having more children?”

There it was again—the unavoidable question. Frank didn’t know what to say. He and Stacey weren’t the best of parents when their girls were babies. They were barely adults themselves, self-absorbed and overwhelmed. Not to mention financially strapped, too proud to ask their families for help, and each with professional ambitions that had nothing to do with raising children. It was a wonder Kate and Emma turned out as great as they had, and he’d have to admit it had little to do with their parenting skills those first three years. The thought of having another little life, or lives, in his hands scared the hell out of him.

Frank sat up and brushed her hair over her shoulder. “It’s just a vacation, honey. It’s not like I’m proposing.” That sounded too much like this was only for sex, and it wasn’t. But he was at a loss for words. Zoe wouldn’t look at him, wouldn’t acknowledge his lips on her rigid shoulder.

“What *is* that noise outside?” She rolled out of bed, taking the bedspread with her, shutting herself away from him physically as well as emotionally.

Frank started to follow, then thought better of it. “News trucks.”

“Outside my house?” She made a peephole in the curtain and shade. “Shit. There are dozens out there.” Zoe jerked her head in his direction, melting him into the mattress with a death-ray glare. “You initiated sex with me knowing these people were right outside and might hear us?”

“I... ” He was fucking up left and right this morning. “We weren’t that obvious.” His cell phone saved his ass. Frank grabbed

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it from the nightstand without checking caller ID. “Ludwig.”

“We have *the* hottest dad in the whole world,” Emma whooped.

“What do you mean?” He wasn’t sure he wanted the answer.

“It’s all over the news this morning.”

“What’s on the news?”

“Double shit.” Zoe zipped from the room, dragging the bedspread with her.

“Your rescue last night,” Kate added. They were on speaker. “Why didn’t you tell us you had a girlfriend? When do we get to meet her? Is it serious? She looks—”

“We’ll talk about this later. I’ve got a situation.” Boy, did he ever. He disconnected as he vaulted from the bed, then hop-stepped into the boxers he snagged from near the door. Zoe had the TV on. Voices droned his way. There wasn’t much mystery about what they were discussing.

He found her perched on the edge of the sofa, the bedspread gathered around her, remote clutched in one hand. Last night’s events played out on the screen.

“She has a voice to die for and last night Zoe White used those soothing, melodic tones to save the lives of an emergency room filled with people. And nearly lost her own life in the process.

“She’d spent the day advocating against domestic violence, only to find herself faced with a nightmare from her past. Zoe White showed true mettle in battling the man who’d terrorized her years before. She’s an example of bravery and sources are suggesting she become the city’s permanent spokeswoman and LAPD liaison for domestic violence.”

He was afraid to move or speak. But then, both were impossible with one foot still wedged in his mouth.

“Well, isn’t this skippy,” she muttered.

## *TO DIE FOR*

More phone calls saved him from responding—one for him and one for her. Frank took the call from Carson into the kitchen. It was brief. Carson didn't need a statement from Zoe at this time. He returned to deliver the good news and found her curled into the corner of the sofa, rubbing her right temple.

"That was Carson." He took a seat next to her feet. "Given the information they presently have, he doesn't need a statement from you right now."

"I know." Zoe looked up from under her lashes. "That was my supervisor. Thanks to that"—she jerked her finger toward the TV—"the lines are flooded with 9-1-1 calls from people who want to hear my voice. Given the circumstances, they've put me on administrative leave until this dies down. I've also been offered the opportunity to transfer over to Media Relations. They've requested me. I'd rather chew ground glass than to work with Valerie Katz anymore. I don't care how much more money they want to give me. And oh, by the way, the services of the department shrink are available and highly suggested."

Frank thought it best not to mention the last was a good idea. "Good. Then there's no reason why you can't come with us to Palm Springs."

A sigh drew her hand down into the cocoon of bedspread and her gaze up to his. "Frank—"

"I'll pay for everything." Which was a cop-out since they were staying at the family time-share.

"I have money." Ice was warmer. "I can pay my own way."

"Sorry. I thought... You're constantly saying one day you'll do this, one day you'll do that... I presumed it was because you were tight for cash."

"It seems we've make a lot of incorrect presumptions about

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each other.” Her tension eased. “Alicia and I are cautious with cash when it comes to house renovations. We don’t want someone doing a half-ass job. These houses are investments for me and my sister. We want it done right. Sometimes that even means doing the work ourselves.”

“And the boxes piled up in the second bedroom?” He pointed toward the hall.

Zoe shrugged. “Lazy? Why unpack when I’ll have to repack in a year or less? Everything I need is out. If I need something else, I’ll unpack it. I can pay my own way.”

“So that’s a yes? You’ll come with us?”

Her shoulders sagged. “I thought I was clear.”

“We’ve had one official date and you’re trying to set the future. Why can’t we have a good time and get to know each other better?”

“Because we’ve had one *non*-date and you want me to meet your kids, to spend a week-long vacation with them. That implies...” She pressed her lips together. “What are you doing with me, Frank?”

Not nearly as much as he wanted to be doing with her. “I want you. It’s pretty clear you want me. Can’t it be as simple as that?” There was nothing simple about it. Until she’d brought up children, Frank had wanted to spend the rest of his life with her.

“Are you in the habit of bringing your girlfriends into your daughters’ lives?”

At least she was referring to herself as his girlfriend. It was a start. A term they could both be comfortable with.

“Nope. Can’t say I ever have.” He slipped his hand under the edge of the bedspread and over her ankle. “You’re special. I want you. I... like you. A lot. I—”

*TO DIE FOR*

“Need adult backup to help watch your almost-adult daughters during spring break?”

Grinning, he pulled her foot his way and crawled over her body. “Something like that. Because I’m going to spend all my time watching you.”

“Flattery will get you—”

“You?”

He peeled the edges of the cover apart. Zoe didn’t resist, though she didn’t help either. A glimpse of her silky skin had him rock-hard. He petted her with the backs of his fingers, watching her breath hitch, her pupils dilate, her lips part, her nipples grow hard. He flicked his thumb over one, feeling his balls tighten with her barely-there whimper. He skimmed his hand to her hip, cupped her ass and pulled her under him.

Zoe wrapped the bedspread around them both. Her kiss was soft, hesitant. Frank let her explore, take her time, though it drove him nearly insane. The instant she flashed her tongue over his, he seated his cock inside her hot, wet pussy. The muscles contracted around him, making sure he wasn’t going anywhere until she was done with him. He imagined himself bound and at her mercy. Her licking and taunting him to the brink, sitting astride him and fucking the stuffing out of him, while a cock ring kept his climax dammed. Then he’d turn the tables on her, have her spread-eagle before him, eat her pussy with ice cream and fudge, fuck her with every sex toy known to man and then improvise with whatever else was on hand. They’d make each other come a thousand times over... and always be hungry to go back for more.

Frank shoved his hand between them, finding her clit slick and hard. Gaze locked onto her beautiful face, he stroked slow and steady, listing the fifty states in his head to keep from coming too



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quickly. Zoe writhed beneath him, arms and legs wrapped tightly around him, as if she never wanted to let go. God knew he didn't want her to. He loved her like crazy, loved her more with each passing second.

He picked up the pace, desperate now to feel her come around him, to spew deep and hard. He ached like he hadn't come in months. Pre-orgasmic spasms rippled over him. His mind started to blank out. Darkness prevailed. His dick was in charge now. Pussy muscles clamped down. Her low moan shot to his balls. He stabbed deep and let go, clenching his jaw against the words that wanted to come with him—*I love you*.

## CHAPTER 7

This had mistake of the heart written all over it. Zoe didn't know what she was thinking. Frank had made himself fairly clear—more or less—that this was about sex. Though she tried to convince herself there was nothing wrong with that, Zoe knew better. She'd tumbled head-over-heels for the guy. So much so she was seriously considering how necessary it was for her to have children. That alone pissed her off. She'd determined long ago to never settle. Relationships were going to be all or nothing. To date, she'd gotten nothing. Long, lonely years of nothing. When weighed against hot sex with a man she loved like crazy... there seemed little choice.

Added to Frank's side of the scales were the reporters camped outside her house. They were a relentless bunch and now knew

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way too much about her, having dug so deep into her past the world now knew where she went to elementary school and the name of every play and musical she'd been in from kindergarten through college. With a week of mandated leave from work, Zoe couldn't see herself barricaded in her house fighting the horde outside. Staying at her parents' or sister's houses wasn't an option either. The reporters would find her there just as easily. Palm Springs put her far enough out of their reach. By the time she returned, they would have moved on to bigger fish and her fifteen minutes would finally be over.

Now here she was, not only following Frank home, but she'd even offered up her truck for the trip. They'd need the extra room with four people and the accompanying luggage. Reporters stayed behind, no doubt assuming she'd be back. Sweaty palms made her grip on the wheel questionable.

Frank pulled into a neighborhood she suspected wouldn't know a repo if one fell from the sky in the middle of its pristine, tree-lined street. Neighbors out jogging, walking, or doing yardwork lifted waves his way when he drove by. They covered all age groups and races and beamed smiles. Frank was genuinely liked, and she imagined it gave people a sense of security to have a cop living in their midst—along with two firefighters, a paramedic, and war vets from World War II until the present.

A garage door yawned open on a light blue-gray house much like all the rest on the block—sprawling with a large green lawn. *Frank's house.* Her heart stuttered. *Frank's bed. Frank's scent.*

His daughters lived across the street with his ex-wife, her paramedic husband, and their two sons.

Zoe had thought it was wonderful they were so close and had a friendly, supportive relationship. Now it added to her nerves. She

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tightened her hold on the steering wheel, pulled into the driveway behind Frank, cut the engine, and braced herself. Nothing happened. No one burst from the house across the street; no neighbors descended on them. The hairs on the back of her neck told Zoe she was being watched, though. She glanced in the rearview mirror as a late model gray sedan crawled by. Sure enough, the driver craned his neck for a closer look. Sun glare on the glass made it impossible for her to see him clearly.

She jumped when Frank opened the truck door. “Come on. It won’t take me long to throw some things in a suitcase.”

“Unlike us women?” she asked with a smile.

“Honey, you’ve got three suitcases.” He pointed to the truck bed.

And a handgun locked in her glove box, but Frank didn’t need to know that. Zoe slid from the seat, brushing against his body. “I like to change my underwear every day.”

“Here I’d hoped you’d be going commando under that pretty pink sundress.”

She felt her cheeks heat, a giggle bubble up, and other parts of her body come alive. “You wish.”

He grinned and wedged her against the seat. “I do.” The husky declaration slid down her spine and whipped around to her clit. An erection nudged her belly.

“You kids want to move it along?” a man from across the street shouted out. “I can’t keep the mob at bay much longer.”

“That’ll be Carl.” Frank eased away.

*Stacey’s husband.* Zoe glanced across the street. A bald man filled the doorway.

Frank draped one arm around Zoe, motioning Carl to release the hounds with the other. “Inside, fast. I’ve got to hide this—”

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*Too late.* Kate and Emma surged from the house. Light brown ponytails bobbed down their slender backs. Stacey Benson hovered in the doorway with Carl for a moment or two, then followed, her smile as wide as that of her look-alike daughters. Two young boys cut to the front, pausing briefly to look both ways before they zoomed past their sisters.

Zoe stood before him to hide his erection. The boys jerked to a stop just shy of her and stared up.

“Wow,” the younger one said, brown eyes wide.

“You’re really pretty,” the other one said, melting Zoe’s heart more than a little.

“Uncle Frank”—he edged passed her—“you’ve *got* to take us with you.”

“The answer to that is no.” Stacey clamped a light hand over his shoulder and steered both boys toward the house. “Finish packing now. We’re going to Death Valley and that’s that.” She smiled up at Zoe. “Carl and I won Uno fair and square. I’m Stacey.” She extended her hand. “I’m very pleased to meet you.”

Zoe slipped her sweaty palm into the other woman’s. “I’ve heard a lot about your family since I’ve met Frank.”

“I would love to say we’ve heard a lot about you, too, but someone has been very secretive.”

Emma and Kate took a stance on either side of Zoe. Identical in looks, but not in personalities, or so Frank had mentioned. Emma’s emotions were out for the world to see. She lacked Kate’s discretion and maturity. They’d be easy to tell apart.

“Too secretive. I’m Emma.”

“And I’m Kate.”

Before Zoe could do more than say hi, they wrapped a hug around her.

## TO DIE FOR

“You’re the bravest woman I’ve ever met,” Kate told her. “I’m so glad you’re with our dad.”

How could she answer that? Was she with Frank? Other than for sex?

“Girls, stop.” Carl drew them away. “You’re giving Zoe and your dad that rabbit-in-the-headlights feeling. Go get your suitcases.”

“Come see what clothes we’re taking. Tell us what you think.” Emma grabbed Zoe’s hand and tugged her forward. With Kate on the other hand, Zoe had little choice.

Frank snagged her elbow, drawing her back. “No, we’ll never get out of here.”

One look at their crestfallen faces made up her mind. “It’s okay. We won’t be long. I promise. Go pack.”

\* \* \*

Frank’s heart twisted at the sight of his daughters gleefully leading Zoe away. A lump settled in his throat. He was vaguely aware of Carl saying he was going to get the boys moving. Then he was left alone with Stacey.

“She’s beautiful, Frank.”

He focused his gaze on her. They’d become best friends over the years of raising children. He’d cherished that... until now... when he knew he was about to spill his guts.

“I’ve known her for six months. We only started seeing each other the night before last, but I love her something fierce.”

“When you know, you know.”

He started for the house.

Stacey followed. “You haven’t told her that yet, have you?”

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“No,” he mumbled.

“Why?”

“She wants children of her own, Stace.”

“So?”

He unlocked the door, stalling for time. “I suck with kids. You know that.”

“You are such an idiot.” She jabbed her finger in his ribs. “The boys adore you. The girls adore you. The neighborhood kids are all over you. You’re the coach everyone wants. You do not suck with kids. Granted we weren’t ideal parents at first, but we were only kids ourselves. We’ve talked about this.”

He removed Glock and holster and secured both in the hall closet gun safe with his off-duty weapons. “Yeah... but still.. ”

Stacey smacked his shoulder. “Don’t you fuck this up, Frank Ludwig. You hear me?”

“I... I already... ”

“Idiot.”

He caught her hand before she could smack him again. “I love her, Stace. I love her crazy mad. I can’t get enough of her. But kids... another little person... or two... ”

Her sigh said it for him. “She was upfront with you about what she wants. That has to count for something.”

“And I was upfront with her.”

“Here you are, cards on the table, both planning a week away. Neither of you walked away. That says a lot, Frank.” She squeezed his fingers. “Love and honesty. It’s more than *we* started with.”

“Is it enough?”

Stacey shrugged.

He wanted answers, guidance, help, and all he got was a shrug.

An air horn shattered the silence and sent them darting for the

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door—the neighborhood watch. Shrill whistles followed. Frank ran outside in time to see seventy-year-old Ira Kowalski tackle a teenage boy from his skateboard. Carl barreled down his driveway wielding a steel baseball bat. Kimmie Allison, at least ten months pregnant, white toy poodles yapping at her feet, toted a shotgun over her belly. Frank was going to have to have a talk with her later about that one. One by one other neighbors joined them, creating a human barricade around the kid.

“He was letting the air out of your woman’s truck tires,” Hetty Banks, owner of the air horn and whistles, told him.

Ira hauled the boy to his feet, giving him a hard shake. “Cops are here now, boy.”

“Give us a little room, people.” Frank flashed his badge and identified himself to the kid. The circle widened. “Want to tell me what this is all about?”

“Some dude paid me a twenty to do it. Things have been rough around our house since my dad got laid off.” The kid glared at Frank like it was *his* fault. “I didn’t think it was a big deal. The dude said it was a joke.”

“It wasn’t. What *dude*?” Carl demanded, bat resting over his shoulder.

The kid glanced around, then jerked his chin toward a late model gray sedan cruising toward them. “That one.”

All heads turned. The driver gunned the engine. Tires squealed, shooting out smoke and the stench of burning rubber. Frank moved in slow motion, toward the kids edging the street. It was too late. Kate, Emma, and Zoe had started to cross, the burden of six rolling suitcases pushing them down the slight incline.

Zoe moved first, letting two suitcases roll into the ongoing car’s path as she fisted Kate and Emma’s tank tops. Frank swore



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he heard the spaghetti straps tear. The girls tumbled to the lawn, their luggage scattering. The driver aimed for them.

“Move!” Zoe yelled.

They scrambled for safety. Zoe cut in the other direction. The driver followed, bent on running her down no matter where she moved. Zoe grabbed the first suitcase she could reach, raising it over her head. Biceps flexed, jaw clenched, she hurled it at the car. It happened so fast. Less than the blink of an eye. Frank fumbled for his nonexistent weapon. The luggage hit the windshield and burst open, scattering its contents and blinding the driver.

From the corner of his eye, Frank watched Carl’s bat fly toward the driver’s side window. Glass shattered with the impact. The bat went through, dinging the driver on the head. The driver jerked the wheel to one side, hand pressed to the bloody wound on his forehead. The right front tire bounced off the curb, plowed into a row of pyracantha bushes, teetered on two wheels, then skimmed two sycamores before weaving around the corner and away.

“I got the license! I got the license!” Hetty shouted.

“I called it in!” Bernie Spears waved his cell phone. The device and his German shepherd were never far from his side. The dog sat at his feet, ears perked, body tense and ready to be called into action. The black labs across the street demanded freedom from their backyard and had incited every dog within a two-mile radius to bark with them.

“Damn it to hell. That was my favorite bat.” This from Carl who snagged clothing from the ground at the same moment Emma cried, “My underwear is all over the filthy street! Everyone can see my underwear!”

She sank to the curb and started to bawl. Her brothers snickered. A glare from Stacey silenced them.

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Frank kept his gaze locked on Zoe, on the fear widening her eyes and the quivers that shook her body. He watched her pull in strength Frank knew he didn't possess at that moment—she'd nearly been killed twice in the last twenty-four hours, and he'd been helpless both times. It wasn't going to happen again.

Determined steps brought her to him. His feet remained rooted in place, while family and neighbors mobilized to retrieve undergarments and gather info for the police he presumed were on the way.

Zoe's eyes swam with tears. He cupped her face between his hands, fighting the urge to crush her lips beneath his, to haul her close and never let go.

"That was Rico Olivera, Xavier's partner." Her voice sounded loud, but he knew it was barely above a whisper.

"You sure?"

She nodded. "I'd recognize his ugly face anywhere."

"I'm unarmed. I need my weapon." Frank felt naked without it, stupid for having left it inside in the first place.

"Then let's go get it." Zoe slipped her arm around his waist and led him toward the house. "I suppose now would be a good time to tell you I have a registered handgun in the glovebox. I'm licensed to carry."

"Is... is your aim as good with it as it is with a suitcase?"

Zoe hugged him. "Better."

He burrowed his face against her ear. "Do you know how much I want to fuck you right now?"

"Because nothing says affection more than a good, hard fuck?" She jerked to a stop and started to pull away. Her cheeks were flushed, eyes looking everywhere but at him.

Frank yanked her back into his arms. "Damn straight. And

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when we get to Palm Springs tonight, I'm going to prove it."

"I'll... I'll get the girls' luggage."

"*After* you get that handgun from your glovebox."

"Frank..." She traced her finger down his cheek. "How do you expect me to carry it?"

"In your panties if you have to. I want it on you at all times."

"That should make pool time interesting."

He blessed her for the distraction the image created. It made him love her all the more. "I think you may have doubled that fucking you're going to get tonight."

She sighed, pushing hard nipples into his chest. "Is that all? Then I'll just have to try harder." She tapped her index finger over his chin, then started to walk away, leaving him with a loaded weapon of his own to deal with.

"Not so fast." He caught her wrist in a loose grip. "I have a shoulder holster inside you can use."

"Liar." Her eyes sparkled.

"Humor me." He rubbed his thumb over her wrist. "I need to hold you. Just for a minute."

Zoe relented. It was she who wrapped her arms around him the second they stepped inside.

Frank kicked the front door closed and swung her against the wall. He fumbled with his belt and zipper with one hand, wadded her sundress to her waist with the other. Fisting his cock, he used the head to shove aside the crotch of her panties, and plunged in to the hilt. Her muffled cry yanked his cum to the edge. He pushed hard, yanking her leg to his waist. Her panties tightened over her clit, the silk sweet against his sac.

It was a raw fuck born of a need to reassert life, a need to let her know how much he loved her because he feared saying the

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words. They came fast, grunting like animals in heat. Frank didn't dare kiss her afterward. He knew it would only make him want her all over again. Instead, they righted themselves as they stepped apart.

"I'll get you that shoulder holster now," he said.

"I'm good," she replied. "I'll use my purse."

Daylight cast Zoe in silhouette when she opened the door. Frank's heart skipped a beat. He retrieved his Glock from the safe before he gave in to the urge—the unquenchable need—to drag her off to his bed for eternity.

\* \* \*

Zoe's orgasm buzz lasted until sunlight slapped her back to reality. Emma wept on the curb, oblivious to her family's efforts to retrieve her underwear. Neighbors chattered in clutches, gesturing wildly while they shared their versions of events. Carl rubbed his hand over his bald head, surveying the damage with Ira. Dog barks added to the cacophony.

And here Zoe stood, Frank's cum soaking her panties, while everyone else tried to restore order. She'd done this. True, she hadn't known this would happen, but she'd caused it nonetheless. Her presence was a threat to their safety and wellbeing.

"I am *not* touching those things again until they're washed," Emma declared hysterically.

Kate rolled her eyes. "You can wash them when we get to Palm Springs."

"But my suitcase is ruined!" She glared across the street at Zoe. "Did you have to use *my* suitcase?"

Stacey whirled around on her daughter so fast Emma jumped.

## TO DIE FOR

“Zoe saved your life. How about a little gratitude, young lady? Now get off your ass and pick up your stuff. Your father’s going to want to get on the road as soon as the police are finished here.”

Zoe appreciated Stacey’s defense, but the bottom line was this wouldn’t have happened if she hadn’t been here. She’d put Frank’s daughters in danger. She wouldn’t do it again.

The *bleep-bleep* of a police siren cleared the way for the cruiser coming down the street. Neighbors formed a double line on each side of the road, waiting for it to come to a stop. She heard the crunch of glass under its tires above the dogs’ barks. A flash of movement at the corner of her eye spiked her adrenaline. Her body tensed, ready to defend herself. But it was only Frank hurrying forward to greet his fellow officers.

*Only Frank.* She snorted. He’d never be *only Frank* ever again. Each time she’d see him, hear his voice, or catch his scent, her body would tighten at the memory of his body on hers, in hers.

Zoe blinked away tears, then busied herself searching for clothing while she waited her turn to give her statement to the police. They’d found Rico’s car at an intersection a couple miles away. He’d run through a traffic light and was T-boned by a Hummer. The other driver was okay. Rico was unconscious.

“You’re going to get sunburned.” Stacey’s voice cut through the turmoil in Zoe’s head. Sure enough, her arms had started to pink. “Let’s find you some shade.”

Shade turned out to be Frank’s house. They sank side-by-side into the depths of a dark green sofa that had to be sinful it was so soft. Zoe tried to process the rest of the décor in Frank’s man-cave. Little filtered in.

Stacey squeezed her hand. “You okay?”

Zoe slipped her fingers free. She’d nearly gotten this woman’s

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daughters killed and yet Stacey was concerned about Zoe's welfare. "I'm so sorry for all this," she said.

"You have nothing to be sorry for." She laid her hand on Zoe's knee, clearly determined to have tactile contact. "You didn't know this man was going to come after you."

No, she didn't, or if it would happen again. "I won't be going to Palm Springs with Frank and the girls."

Stacey sucked in a breath through her teeth. "That's not going to go over well."

"I won't risk your daughters—"

"If they hadn't had their heads up their asses, they'd have seen and heard the car coming. Trust me, my girls can generally take care of themselves. Don't let Emma's hysterics fool you. She's always been a drama queen."

"I think she has every reason to be dramatic right now."

Stacey snickered. "Over underwear? Please. If Frank had swooped her into his arms right away—"

"Instead of me," she interrupted.

"Technically, you are the one who *swooped* him up." Stacey pulled her hand away. "As I was saying... the only thing that calms Emma down when she's like that is to ignore her. Although Kate's been known to pinch her hard."

Zoe frowned. "Doesn't that make it worse?"

Stacey nudged her shoulder into Zoe's. "Why do you think I escaped in here with you? Those two are one pinch away from bitch slapping each other on the front lawn. Frank and Carl can deal with it." The hand was back on her knee. "I trust Frank to keep them safe. This wasn't your fault. The time-share has excellent security. Don't do this. Don't put Frank in the position of having to choose between you and them."

## TO DIE FOR

“He won’t have to choose. I’m making the decision for him.” She pushed to her feet and walked away, half-expecting Stacey to try to stop her, almost wishing she would.

Frank glanced up from a conversation with Theo Garcia when Zoe approached. “Where’s your purse?” Meaning *where’s your weapon?*

“I think it’s best I let you go on vacation without me.”

His eyebrows slammed together. Fire stirred in his eyes. Zoe executed a crisp pivot and strode to her truck. No one stopped her. No one said a word. The only sound was those damn dogs barking over the squawk of the police scanner.

Hands shaking, she clicked the seat belt in place, started the engine, and drove away.

## CHAPTER 8

The reporters were gone. Zoe suspected they'd be back once they heard about the latest incident. At least their presence would provide some measure of protection. Not that she needed it... or maybe she did. Who knew anymore? Zoe could understand Xavier coming after her, but Rico? What threat did she pose to him? He'd gone down the same as Xavier for armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon years ago, then cut a deal with the district attorney for a drastically reduced sentence. Rico had nothing to fear from her... and everything to fear from Xavier's parole. Xavier made his anger fairly clear after his trial.

It was no surprise when Theo Garcia pulled up in front of her house as Zoe hauled her suitcases from the truck bed. She rubbed her temple, promising her growing headache a dose of ibuprofen.



## TO DIE FOR

That didn't quell her disappointment in Frank for not following her home and herself for wanting him to.

"I suppose you'll want a statement." She walked on to the door. Theo followed. "You left a crime scene."

"Yet you managed to find me. You *are* a good detective." She shoved the front door open. "Want to do a room sweep before I walk in?"

"I'm seeing a sarcastic side to you these last couple of days I never would have suspected out of someone so seemingly sweet." Theo pulled the handgun from his shoulder holster. "I like it. If you get tired of Frank..." He swung inside.

Zoe counted the seconds until he called, "Clear," then walked in and locked the door behind her.

"Check the windows and locks," he said. "I'm right behind you. I'll check the closets, showers, and under the beds."

She didn't argue, and Theo didn't say a word when she pulled the .38 from her purse. They moved through her house, double-checking everything, even her bursting-at-the-seams second bedroom. Relief sank her into one of the living room chairs afterward. Theo sat on the edge of the couch, forearms on knees.

"What the hell's going on, Zoe?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea. Xavier, yes. Rico?" She shrugged.

He flicked a notepad from his back jeans pocket and tapped it against his fingers. "What stands out most in your mind right now?"

"How stupid I was to charge Rico's car armed with only a suitcase."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I heard about that. Frank's neighborhood will be talking about that for years."

*TO DIE FOR*

“Better that than mentioning Emma’s underwear scattered all over the street.”

“She’s mortified, but she’ll survive. So... you’re not going to Palm Springs?”

“What’s business—”

“Because with Frank not here, I’m concerned about your safety. Hell, there’ll be an army of cops ready to stand watch over you once they hear about this latest attempt on your life. It wouldn’t surprise me if the wives didn’t start a task force to protect you.”

Frank was gone. It was over. Her choice. Her decision. Zoe had to deal with it. “I... I didn’t want to put Kate and Emma in danger.”

“So you chose to stay alone?”

When did things get so complicated? “This is all Valerie Katz’s fault. If it weren’t for that press conference—”

“You won’t hear any arguments from me. I agree one hundred percent. That woman has an agenda of her own and she’ll use anyone and anything to get it. She doesn’t care whose career she ruins or whose heart she breaks in the process.”

“Is that coming from experience?”

He chuffed. “Not mine. I have nothing she wants. I also have better taste than to go for someone like her.”

Zoe was too tired to press for more details. She’d already had more experience with Valerie than she wanted. “At least she and Josh are all right.”

“Josh has been with the shrink all day. It’ll be a long time before he’s cleared for duty. They released Valerie this morning. Minor concussion. But brass is calling her on the carpet for having dismissed your protection detail. She’s in deep shit and dragging

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Josh down with her.”

It couldn't happen to a nicer pair.

“I'll take you to the station in a bit so we can take your formal statement about all the events. In the meantime”—leaning back, Theo opened his little notebook—“talk to me. Let's see if we can't figure this out.”

It was a futile effort. As the minutes passed into an hour, Zoe watched the furrow between Theo's eyes deepen. Nothing pieced together. Having a deranged fan made more sense.

*Don't even think it.*

The sound of a vehicle pulling into the driveway brought him to his feet, hand on his weapon. Zoe grabbed her purse, ready to back him up if necessary. He was halfway to the window when someone knocked.

“It's me.”

*Frank!* Her heart somersaulted.

Theo put the handgun away and opened the door. “About time.”

Frank grunted a response. A giant step brought him inside.

Theo looked her way. “I'll be right outside if you need me.”

“I'm sure Zoe appreciates that,” Frank said, and shut the door in his face.

“You pissed me off, Zoe.” He slowly walked toward her, then sat on the edge of the rickety coffee table. The heat from his body poured over her. Barely an inch separated them. “I thought it best if I cooled off before saying or doing anything I'd regret.”

“Such as?”

“Oh... basically making a fool of myself and teaching all the kids within earshot words they really shouldn't hear. Dragging you off to Palm Springs. Demanding you go. Laying down ultimatums

## TO DIE FOR

that really shouldn't be given. Making decisions without consulting the other person whom they involve."

Screaming would have had less impact. "I didn't want to put you in the position of having to choose."

"There's choosing and then there's compromise. You didn't give me a chance."

Guilt gouged a trench in her heart, but she refused to break eye contact.

"Stacey and Carl are on their way to Death Valley with their boys. The girls are at my house waiting for us to go to Palm Springs."

"I'm not going, and don't think you can fuck a yes out of me. Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice—"

"I love you, Zoe."

Her mouth dropped open. Talk about impact. She'd stopped breathing. "Wh... what?" Not the most intelligent response, but all she could gasp out.

"I love you. And like an idiot I've tried to say with my dick instead of words. I love you. I have for months, but was too chicken to do anything about it."

"But... but... " *I love you, too. Say it. I love you, too.* "But children... "

"One step at a time, honey. Give us a chance." He held out his hand. "Come with us to Palm Springs, Zoe. Please."

She glanced at his palm, open and welcoming, then into his face so filled with hope and... love.

"We'll be safe, honey. I promise," he said. "Please." He added a grin. "I'll let you have your way with me." The grin disappeared. "There I go, talking with my dick again."

"Well... I do like what it has to say," she replied.

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“Is that a yes? You’ll go with us?”

“I have to go to the station to make an official statement about everything, but...” Gaze locked to his, she slipped her fingers into his hand. “Yeah, I’ll go. Do you want me to meet you at the house after I’m done, or leave your car in my garage and go with me?”

One eyebrow arched. “You have to ask?”

She splayed her fingers against the base of her throat. “What was I thinking?”

He leaned over her, one knee wedged high between her thighs. “Of tonight, I hope.”

“Of how I’m going to have my way with you?”

“You have my attention.” He butted his forehead to hers, rubbing noses.

“I have your attention, or are you at attention?”

Laughing, Frank stood, dragging her to her feet. “Unless you want a conversation with my—”

“Tallywhacker?”

“Oh, my God, what have I gotten myself into?”

Zoe slithered her body against his. “Me?”

“Enough.” He turned her toward the door. “Scoot.” He followed up with a sharp swat to her backside that froze them both... for different reasons.

“Shit, honey.” He wrapped a hug around her. “I’m sorry. I forgot. I didn’t mean—”

Zoe pressed her fingers over his lips. “I know the difference, Frank.” God, did she know the difference. Sweet warmth spread over her ass, swelling her clit. She’d shared her secret with Xavier and he’d ruined that passion forever. Maybe Frank would be willing to help her find it again. But was she willing to let him try? Did she trust him enough not to cross that line from pleasure to

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pain, from loving to abuse? In the end, she decided it was a door best left closed.

“Let’s go,” she said. “The sooner I finish these statements, the sooner we can get on the road.”

He nodded, but the agony written all over his face was almost enough to make Zoe change her mind. Almost... but not enough.

Frank’s presumed misstep cast a pall over his declaration of love. Zoe wanted the joy back. She stopped him at the front door, pushing him until his back hit the wall and her body held him captive against it.

“I love you, too, Frank. I love you.”

Zoe pushed every ounce of feeling she possessed into the words. Then she decided she’d speak a language he’d have no trouble understanding. Her willpower kept him pinned to the wall, that and the fact she wasted little time releasing his rigid cock. His resistance was half-hearted at best when she knelt before him. Long fingers slid through her hair, then stilled. She glanced up at him from under her lashes and wrapped her fist around his erection. Fluid leaked from the tip. She caught it on the tip of her tongue, relishing his groan and that his knees buckled. She sucked him like she owned him, missing nothing, squeezing his sac, looping around the crown until he thrust wildly into her mouth. He came in a torrent. Zoe swallowed every drop, then tucked his flaccid penis away, stood, and wiped her fingers over the corners of her mouth while she let her eyes flash a victory glimmer.

“I feel like I should salute you,” he said, panting for breath.

She gave a pointed glance to his crotch. “Can you?”

He chuckled. “Not right now.”

“Good.” She patted his hip. “Get my luggage. Time’s wasting.”

“Yes, ma’am. Just as soon as my brain reconnects with the rest

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of me.”

\* \* \*

Zoe was physically and emotionally drained, and more than a little angry. She wasn't alone. The minute she walked into the station, Internal Affairs swept her away. Theo went ballistic. Frank dragged him away before his rage made him a target.

The department was more interested in Valerie's alleged misconduct than the attempts on Zoe's life. In painstaking detail, she spelled out what had happened from the time she'd stepped into Katz's orbit until the sniper ended Xavier's miserable life. Not once did they ask about Xavier or Rico.

Four hours later, statement reviewed and signed, they let her leave while they scurried into the bowels of the building, most likely to avoid fallout. Theo pushed off the wall when he saw her, reaching Zoe before Frank did.

“I had no idea they were going to pull this shit. Fucking bastards,” he said.

“It's all right, Theo. I know.”

“You ready to go?” Frank pressed his hand over the small of her back.

“I desperately need a stop in the ladies room, then I'll be set.”

“I'll be right outside.”

“I won't be long.” Zoe was close to bursting as it was. One would think she was the accused, the way they'd hammered at her statement. She swung the door open... and came face to face with Valerie Katz.

“You!” The woman stabbed a finger in Zoe's face. “This is your doing! I'm ruined, thanks to you. All you had to do was keep

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your fucking mouth shut.”

Zoe’s temper snapped. “Get your finger out of my face before I break it off and shove it up your ass.”

Rage mottled Katz’s face. She spewed a string of Spanish curses Zoe hadn’t heard since Xavier was sentenced. Hands in claws, snarl ripping from her throat, she lunged. Zoe blocked with her forearm, then kicked Katz’s leg out from under her. She fell back, whacking herself unconscious once more on the tile floor.

“Holy shit,” Theo muttered.

“Drag her out of here or shut the door.” Zoe stepped over her prone figure. “I’ve gotta pee.”

As she slammed the stall door closed, she heard Theo say, “You gotta love a woman who’s armed and dangerous. You are one lucky son of a bitch.”

“Don’t I know it,” Frank replied.



## CHAPTER 9

Zoe counted the cottontail rabbits that played chicken in the truck's headlights. They were down to the last mile of their trip to Palm Springs... finally. A pity it was in what felt like the dead of night. She would have loved to see the palmed canyon in full color. They'd gotten a late departure right into rush hour traffic, no thanks to her. Reports had to be filed, even if her attack on Valerie was in self-defense, and Internal Affairs was outside the ladies room before the toilet stopped flushing.

Kate and Emma took the news with unfettered delight, roaring with laughter when Frank gave them the full details. The Legend of Zoe White grew. She'd be hearing about it for the rest of her life.

*I wonder if this is how Daniel Boone got started.*

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“There it is!” the girls announced.

Sure enough, a sprawling white stucco house with red-tiled roof appeared in the headlights. Asphalt road gave way to cobblestone driveway. Security lights glowed from a deep-set arched porch. Towering palms stood guard and there wasn’t another house within viewing distance. Zoe felt like she’d stepped back in time.

“This is a time-share?”

“We call it that, but it’s really a family-owned property.” Frank cut the engine and stretched. “We coordinate and take turns. It’s a beauty of a house. Been here since the thirties, upgraded and renovated, of course.”

A dream come true. “It’s beautiful.”

“Wait ’til you see the inside.” Kate opened the door, hopped out, and reached for her suitcases. “Dad can give you the grand tour. We’re going to bed.”

“Here.” Frank tossed her the house keys. Kate caught them with one hand. “Don’t forget—”

“The security code. Yes, Dad. I know.” The weary sigh of a teenager burdened with a stupid parent followed.

Zoe covered her mouth to hide her smile.

“I’m sleeping late tomorrow,” Emma added, trudging behind her sister.

“And this is new how?” Frank mumbled.

Zoe snickered.

“I’m guessing this means the two of you aren’t going to help us carrying in the groceries?” he called out.

The girls turned a look on him that called Frank insane.

“Or you can go hungry,” he added.

Zoe was fairly certain she saw Emma mouth, “Fuck.”

## TO DIE FOR

“Stop it.” She poked his ribs. “Go on. We’ve got it.” She waved the girls onward. Both sagged with relief.

“We love you, Zoe.” In unison no less.

“Getting deep. Don’t fall for their charms.” Frank winked and patted her thigh. “Let’s grab our gear and head inside. You’re going to love it.”

She did, stopping so quickly in the doorway Frank smacked into her. “Oh, my God,” Zoe gasped, awestruck at the wide-open floor space and the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that made up the opposing patio wall.

“Pool?”

“To the right of the patio garden. Look around. I’ll get the rest of the stuff.”

Zoe didn’t argue. Dark tan pavers in the entryway gave way to sage green, deep pile carpeting. She kicked off her sandals and stepped into heaven. Two long couches were flanked by six double-wide chairs, a mix of soft greens and blues she never would have pieced together, but that made the perfect oasis of calm. She ran her fingers over the soft material and longed to stretch into the welcoming depths of those plush cushions. Birch coffee and end tables had a blonde finish that matched the long dining room table and chairs beyond and the two breakfast islands that marked the beginning of the kitchen. This was a home for entertaining, for family.

She hoisted her purse strap to her shoulder, looped her arms through several eco grocery bags, and walked on to a kitchen she’d only seen in magazines. Stainless steel appliances—two ovens, a microwave/convection oven, and huge side-by-side refrigerator/freezer that would hold enough food to feed..

*A very big family.*

## *TO DIE FOR*

Emotion caught her unaware.

“You okay?” Frank set four bags on the counter.

Zoe studied the ceramic tile on the wall. Desert wildlife was depicted on each one. “I think I have house envy. Alicia and I could flip houses until our dying day and we’d never score something this grand.”

“If you did, would you even want to sell it?”

“No.” She shook her head without hesitation. “And I’d want to be very hands-on in the renovation.” Zoe started unpacking the groceries. “You hungry? I can whip up something.” They’d stopped at Sizzler along the way and gorged themselves, but she still felt it polite to ask.

“Only for you.” He came up behind her and braced his hands on the counter, blocking her in. His breath rustled her hair, mouth burrowed against her neck.

Zoe tried to swallow a moan. It came out anyway. “You promised I could have my way with you.”

“I did.” He nibbled downward, hands now drifting to the buttons on her sundress.

“We’re not alone,” she sing-songed.

Frank sighed, dropped his hand to the counter... and wedged his erection against her.

“You have got to be the horniest man I’ve ever known.”

“Only for you,” he replied quickly.

Zoe pulled his arms around her waist. “You get the bedroom ready, and I’ll finish putting the groceries away.”

“Deal.” A giant step separated them. “We’re the last room on the right.” He pointed to the hallway off the dining room, snagged all four suitcases, and took off.

Zoe’d never seen anyone move so fast, and understood his

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eagerness all too well. She tried to take her time putting things away, familiarizing herself with the kitchen. In the end, her own horny won out when Frank walked from the hallway in a pair of jeans with nothing else but an erection bulging the zipper.

He swept a gaze down her body that sent tremors right to her happy places. Mesmerized by that life-sculpted chest, the hair sprinkled across it that begged to be played with, and an imagination rampant with all the things she wanted to do to him, Zoe watched him reset the security system and double-check the locks.

“I’m waiting,” he said once he returned to the hall entrance.

Zoe smiled. “I’m ready.” She grabbed her purse and followed, enjoying the view of his tight ass with every step he took.

He nudged the door wider with the tip of his finger. “The bedrooms pale in comparison to the rest of the house. They’re small, but each of the six bedrooms shares a bath so...” A shrug finished his sentence.

Zoe admitted disappointment. A queen-sized bed sans headboard greeted her. Two tiny nightstands hugged its sides. A dresser with mirror was wedged against the wall next to a pocket door that led to the bathroom. A similar door on the opposite wall had to be the closet. Their suitcases took up a good portion of the floor space. Thank goodness, the walls were a pale peach; any darker and the occupant would have claustrophobia.

“I took the liberty of unpacking us,” he declared proudly.

Zoe feigned a gasp. “You touched my underwear?”

“I sure did.” He grinned. “Sniffed it, too. Our robes are hanging in the bathroom... touching,” he added with a whisper.

“Well then”—she stabbed her fingers in the waistband of his jeans—“we should follow that example.” She dragged him down

## TO DIE FOR

to the bed with her, then rolled on top of him.

Frank cupped her ass. “Room’s not soundproof.”

She ground into his dick. “Are you saying I should gag you?”

His eyes sparked to life. “Only if you want to. Maybe tied spread-eagle and at your mercy. I’d like that very much,” he added quickly. “And if you want to do that thing with your mouth and my cock you did earlier, I won’t complain either.”

*Oh, the possibilities!*

\* \* \*

Frank wanted to be noble and claim he was putting power back into her hands. That would make him a liar. He wanted a fantasy fulfilled, wanted to feel Zoe loving all over him, in control of his pleasure and hers. She hesitated so long he thought he’d screwed up, but he wasn’t going to retract the words, wasn’t going to say he was only joking... because he was damn serious. He’d trusted very few women with this kind of sex play. Most of them didn’t know what the hell they were doing anyway. But Zoe?

His skin heated at the flashes of dominance she’d displayed. She was a beautiful butterfly waiting to burst from its cocoon. This was a woman who’d stand by his side through the years and wouldn’t put up with any nonsense. His equal, his partner... he hoped.

He shut out the image of babies and children. One step at a time. This was one of them. His fantasy, which made him wonder what some of hers might be. Another question unasked... but not for long.

“Are you serious?” she asked.

“I am.”

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She pressed her full lips together, then licked her tongue between them. “You’ve done this before?”

“A few times.” He wouldn’t lie to her. “Not often. You really have to trust someone...” Frank shut up when her eyes clouded over. He didn’t want to think of what memory he might have stirred for her. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Still, he left the ball in her court.

“Frank... I...” A slight headshake cut off whatever she was going to say. She rose slowly, dancing her short nails down his torso, then over his erection. “Pull the covers down and strip. I want you naked and ready when I come back.”

She didn’t have to tell him twice. Frank had his jeans off before Zoe shut the door to the bathroom. A wrist snap yanked bedspread and sheets to the floor, then he flopped down face up to wait for her. She came out seconds later dressed in her robe, the belts from both robes in her hands. A lift of her brow ordered him to spread his legs. Frank obeyed and felt the weight in his cock and balls double. Zoe tied a sturdy knot around his ankle with one terrycloth belt, then tied the end to the bedframe leg. By the time she’d secured the other ankle, his brain had officially shifted south.

He watched her retrieve panties and socks from the drawers and slowly tie a makeshift rope. Not once did her gaze stray from his body. He felt worshipped, adored, hungered for. When she was finished, Zoe climbed astride his hips, twirling one pair of panties around her finger.

“This goes in your mouth if you get too... loud.” Her whisper slithered into his bones.

She leaned over him, tying his wrists together, so close he could almost taste her pussy juices trickling over his tongue. After she’d tied the ends to the bedframe, she sank her cleft along his

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erection to admire her handiwork. God help him, Frank tried to be still. Her heat was too much to resist. He shifted and stabbed, trying desperately to sink into her heat.

“Uh-uh-uh.” Zoe pinched his nipples.

Tiny shockwaves zinged through his body, choking a garbled moan from deep in his chest. The slither of soft cotton danced upward in its wake.

“In case you need a reminder.” She draped her panties across the base of his throat. “Those are the ones I was wearing earlier.”

The scent nearly yanked the cum right out of him.

Zoe started at his collarbones, tracing the lines, licking them, running her nails through the hollows. Her nipples rasped over his, setting every hair on his body upright. She tucked her ass against his cock, wiggling and rubbing along the length. Frank closed his eyes and soaked it all in.

Kisses traveled to his wrist, her long hair tickling behind. Then the other wrist, while her butt cheeks continued to devil his dick. She raised a little, shifting her body lower. His erection grazed her pubic hair. Frank clenched his jaw to fight the rush. Thankfully, she eased away, stilled, and gave him time to gather control.

“Maybe I should tie those panties tight around your cock.”

What was left of his mind blanked.

“Then seat myself on you and give you a fuck—”

“Stop, honey,” he begged. “One more word and I’m done.”

She knelt between his thighs, hands resting on his stomach. “My mother has the most beautiful vegetable garden I’ve ever seen, but I’ve tried and tried and can’t grow a thing. It’s time and patience, I know, nurturing the soil and all that.”

“What?” He frowned up at her. How the hell had super hot sex transitioned into gardening?



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Zoe smirked. “I’m trying to distract you from orgasm. Did it work?”

“Well... yeah.”

“Good.” Without warning, she dived for his cock and sucked him in.

Frank’s hips shot from the bed. She grabbed his balls in one hand, choked off his climax with the other, and sucked him senseless. Just when he thought he couldn’t bear it a second longer, she released him... and aimed for his sac, sucking, licking, separating his balls. And her fingers—God, her fingers!—found virgin territory. She nudged against his anus, demanding entry. Frank writhed under the onslaught. She stopped, only to return with spit-slickened fingers.

Zoe licked up his erection, then sucked it in. One thrust sank her fingers inside. He froze, gasping for breath. The pain was brief and eased into something he’d never imagined. So full, so complete, so much. She rolled her fingers upward, finding a sweet spot. His muscles locked. He plowed into her mouth, jaw clenched around a moan too much to contain. Waves of hot, thick cum shot into her throat, a true full-body orgasm. Still she sucked him, demanding more. And he gave it.

Zoe eased from him. Frank couldn’t think straight, could barely breathe. On some level, he knew she’d gone into the bathroom. She returned with a warm washcloth and wiped the sweat from his body, pampered his penis and balls. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her, how great this was, how perfect. The words died when she crawled astride him once more, this time over his chest. She parted her labia, showing him her blood-swollen clit. Frank inhaled the scent and licked his lips.

“Give it to me, honey,” he begged.

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Zoe sank her pussy to his mouth, her soft moan blessing the feel of his lips around her. Now Frank hated that he was tied, that he couldn't cup her hips and guide her movement. That he couldn't flip her over and use his fingers the way she had on him. She rocked with the tongue swipes, gasping when he hit in just the right place. The time for seduction was over. His woman needed to come. He trapped her clit between his lips and flashed his tongue over it. Her thighs tightened, then quivered. He glanced up under his brows when she arched into the orgasm. God, there was never a more beautiful woman!

He traced her folds, lapping up her juices. When her climax subsided, she stretched out atop him, idly flicking his nipple under her thumb.

"You'd make one hell of a dominatrix." He managed to kiss her forehead.

"Thanks... I think," she said with a chuckle.

"You do realize my fingers are going to find their way into your ass," he promised.

"I do hope so." She flicked his nipple harder. "But just so there's no misunderstanding... Considering the size of your *manhood*, that's the only thing you'll ever be putting up there."

"Never say never, honey. Uhm... do you suppose you could untie now?"

She snapped her head up, eyes wide. "I'm so sorry." She scooted upright to his wrists. "Uh-oh, I think I might have gotten the knots a little—"

The security alarm cut off anything else.

"Fuck! Get me untied, Zoe," he whispered.

"I can't. Too tight. I—"

His struggle to be free only tightened the knots.

## TO DIE FOR

“Screw it!” She rolled from bed, stabbed her arms into her robe, and yanked the .38 from her purse.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“Shut up,” she snarled and shoved her panties into his mouth. “And you call yourself a cop. You’re going to give us away.”

The last thing he saw was her blue robe fluttering out behind her as she ran from the room. His heart pounded in a mix of fear, rage, and helplessness. The knots were impossible and now had started cutting off the circulation in his left wrist. He prayed it was nothing and actually hoped Kate and Emma had gone outside without deactivating the alarm. Then he heard Zoe shout.

“One more step and I’ll blow your fucking head off!”

Frank thrashed against the ties. Long minutes passed when he heard nothing and feared everything. Then the bedroom door crept open. Zoe clutched a butcher knife in one hand, the .38 in the other. He’d never seen anyone’s face so red.

She avoided his gaze, shut the door, and hurried forward to cut him loose. “Uhm... your parents are here.”

\* \* \*

Yes, it was possible to die of embarrassment. Frank was furious. He glared at her tight-lipped and silent after she removed the gag. Zoe sawed through the restraints on his wrist as fast as she could. Frank snatched the knife from her hand the instant he was free, then sliced through the loop cutting off circulation in his other hand and grimaced as blood rushed back in.

Zoe tucked her handgun into her purse and clutched the edges of her robe closed. In seconds, he had the robe belts cut in two. “I’ll sew those.”

## TO DIE FOR

Frank shot her a look that would melt icebergs. “You gagged me.”

She hiked her chin up, hoping it made her look more confident than she felt. “What was I supposed to do? You were giving our position away.”

“So you’d leave me trussed up and defenseless?”

“I was saving us,” she mumbled, turning away. “*You* couldn’t.” Let him defend that.

“Get dressed.” He grabbed his jeans from the floor. “I’m not going out there alone.”

They’d seen far too much of her as it was. Zoe wasn’t sure she could face them again so soon, maybe never. And when they saw the dark red restraint marks around Frank’s wrists, what would they think?

“Now, Zoe.” Frank yanked a T-shirt over his head and strode from the room. He knocked on Kate and Emma’s rooms and said, “Clear. It’s your grandparents. You can go back to sleep.” He spun around, hands braced on hips, and huffed out a breath. “I’m waiting. Clothes.”

There was no point arguing, though she was half-tempted to tie the edges of the belt together and go out in her robe. Then Kate poked her head from her room.

“You were going to blow my grandparents’ heads away?” she asked through wide eyes.

The other door opened. “Their *fucking* heads,” Emma amended.

“Girls...” Frank’s tone warned them against testing him.

Zoe took it to heart and walked to the bathroom to change into her sundress. Frank was still standing in the doorway when she stepped out.

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“Ready?”

“I am.” She brushed by him. “Though I’ve got to go commando.”

She reveled at his sharp intake of breath. That fierce gaze morphed into the lust she recognized. Another calmer breath eased the tension in his shoulders. He motioned her forward, then pressed his hand against her lower back.

Kate and Emma now flanked their grandparents. Six glasses of red wine sat on the coffee table. The elder Ludwigs smiled at Zoe and Frank, hints of their son radiating from their expressions. Frank was the perfect combination of both parents.

“You’re giving my girls wine?” Frank asked.

His mother waved the admonition away. “We’re home. It’s been a day. It’s a nice malbec. What harm is there? They’re almost eighteen, Frank.” Her gaze settled on Zoe. “We’ve certainly heard a lot about you.”

Zoe didn’t want to know.

“Mom, Dad, this is Zoe White. Zoe, my parents, Walt and Anne.”

Awkward nods went around. Zoe sank to the edge of the sofa, spine ramrod straight, knees pressed together.

“Why are you here?” Frank sat beside her, reached for two glasses, and passed one her way.

“Stacey called. Told us all about Zoe. She thought it might be nice if we joined you this week, helped keep the girls occupied and let you two have a little private time. We discussed it and... here we are.” She tucked her feet under her and curled into the cushion. A cat with cream looked less content than Anne Ludwig with her glass of wine.

“A phone call would’ve been nice.”

## TO DIE FOR

“Have you checked your voice mail?” Walt leaned forward. “Zoe, I like a woman who packs her own heat and knows how to use it.”

Zoe prayed for a lightning bolt to end her mortification. “I... uh... It was... Frank was in the bathroom.”

Walt’s gaze dropped to Frank’s wrists. “Was he now?”

Heat rushed her from head to toe.

“It’s been a long day,” she said in a rush of breath. “I’m exhausted. It was a plea—I’m glad to have met... I’ll see you all in the morning.” She started to stand and wanted to die all over again. Her sundress was stuck between her butt cheeks.

Zoe glanced at Frank for help. He merely smirked. She was here for the duration.

“A glass of wine and we’ll all call it a night.” Anne lifted her glass. “Now... tell us all about you.”

*Kill me now.*

\* \* \*

“That wasn’t as awkward and painful as I imagined.”

Frank disagreed. He shut and locked the door behind them. “Speak for yourself. My dad pulled me aside and told me we needed to find safer bindings if we’re going to play like that. Then he gave me a list of websites and recommendations.” It was worse than when he was twelve and his dad caught him jerking off to a *Penthouse* Frank had found under his parents’ bed.

“Your parents saw me naked.” Zoe grabbed a nightie from the drawer and went to the bathroom to change. “And my dress caught up in my ass.”

“And whose fault is that?” Frank found his pajama bottoms.

## *TO DIE FOR*

“Next time, I’ll let the bad guy get you.” He heard the water run, the sound of her brushing her teeth, and decided she was going to share the sink.

“There was no bad guy.” He nudged her to one side as he grabbed his toothbrush.

“There could have been,” she said around a mouth of paste. “Someone had to protect us.”

He squeezed the tube too hard, spurting paste over the sink. “Are you implying I can’t?”

Zoe rinsed and spit. “I’m not implying anything. It was my fault I tied you too tight. I couldn’t do nothing.”

Three times there’d been danger. Three times Frank had been helpless to do anything about it. He felt emasculated and damn well pissed that Zoe took the risk tonight. Even Emma and Kate knew enough to hide if there was the hint of an intruder.

“There was a multi-tool in my jeans pocket.”

“I didn’t know that.” She stabbed her toothbrush in the holder.

Not to be outdone, Frank followed suit. “You would have, if you hadn’t stuffed your panties in my mouth.”

“So spank me and we’ll call it even all around.”

She glared up at him, arms crossed, hair tumbled around her shoulders. Frank’s mind whirled, trying to process what she’d said. There seemed only one response.

“What?” Had she lost her mind?

“Never mind.” She waved her palms and pushed by him. “I was being a smart ass. Let’s just get some sleep.”

Frank wouldn’t let it go. He waited until they crawled under the covers and the lights were out, then spooned against her.

“If that challenge was a pattern of defense, I don’t like it,” he said softly. “I’m not Xavier. If we have issues, we talk them out. I

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will never resort to violence, no matter how angry I might be.”

Her sigh was long and heavy. It made him sad.

“You aren’t the only one who has fantasies, Frank. There were... are... were things that turned me on, too. Xavier stole that from me by crossing a line. You trusted me tonight. I guess I was hoping that trust went both ways. It came out wrong, not the way I intended to mention it to you.”

A mix of emotions churned his stomach. “You can trust me, honey, but maybe I’m afraid I won’t be able to trust myself. I’ve never done anything like that before. What if I cross a line and don’t realize it? I’m going to have to think about this.”

“Me, too.” She draped her arm over his and squeezed. “It’s scary. Scariest than children, isn’t it?”

“Yeah... way scarier.”

He felt odd admitting that after the knockout fantasy sex she’d given him tonight. What the hell kind of man was he? He couldn’t protect his woman, he wouldn’t commit to children, and he balked at helping her sexual healing. God, he really was a coward... in more ways than one.

“Go to sleep, Frank.” She patted his arm. “Don’t worry about it.”

But he would worry about, and sleep was a long time coming.



## CHAPTER 10

This was peace—sitting on the patio with her morning coffee, prune danish, and the sunshine playing peek-a-boo in the palm trees. The air was fresh, no hint of smog. Clean and pure as the cloudless blue sky overhead.

So far, Zoe had the flagstone patio to herself. Birds chattered through the trees and she'd made good friends with a little Anna's hummingbird intrigued by the red carnation on the side of Zoe's coffee mug.

The privacy wasn't going to last much longer. She heard movement and voices inside—Frank and his parents from the sounds of it. Zoe wasn't ready to face any of them. Inadvertently flashing Walt and Anne she could gloss over; after all, she'd thought they were intruders. But to have talked to Frank about *that*.

## *TO DIE FOR*

She should have known better.

The door behind her slid open. A peek over her shoulder gave her Frank's smile. He'd shaved. The man really hated whiskers. He looked hot in jeans, loose green and white tropical shirt, and sneakers. Zoe wondered if she came close to matching him.

She offered a smile of her own and wished she could feel it inside. All she wanted was to erase her bedside confession.

"Good morning." Frank nuzzled her neck, working his way to her lips. It set off tremors inside her, blocking out her misgivings. He toyed with her top button, then traced her cleavage below the V of her cotton shirt.

"God, Dad, you are such a horndog," Emma grumbled.

Frank rose slowly, body tense. He dragged out a chair and set the coffee mug he'd been holding in his left hand on the table.

Emma plopped in the chair across from them. "You're like that guy you always warned us about, always wanting to—"

"Enough." Knuckles braced on the edge of the table, he leaned toward her. The stance warned Emma against uttering another word, and, from her wide eyes, she knew it. "I've had all of your mouth I'm going to take. Not another word. And I would highly advise against you leaving this table in a huff. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." She helped herself to a danish, then looked up with tear-filled eyes. "Billy broke up with me. He texted me yesterday."

"That's no reason to take it out on your family. We love each other. We support each other. We can't help you unless we know what's wrong. Besides... Billy is a jerk and an ass." He grabbed a danish from the box and tore off a piece. "And if I so much as catch that little punk spitting in the street, I'm gonna lock his ass up 'til he learns what being a man's really like. No one breaks my little girl's heart and gets away with it. A text? Clearly, he has no

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balls to man-up.”

Emma laughed and flicked away tears. “I love you, Daddy.”

Zoe knew exactly how she felt. Her heart was filled to bursting she loved him so much right now.

“I love you, too, baby,” he said with a wink.

“You’re the best dad ever,” Emma added.

“Even if I am a horndog?”

She giggled. “Even if.”

Zoe nudged his foot. “Even if.”

He dusted the crumbs from his fingers, picked up his coffee, and dropped his free hand to Zoe’s thigh. The warmth of it spread through her jeans. He jerked away when the sliding door opened.

“Phone call, Frank.” Walt slid the cordless to the table. “You really need to turn your cell phone on. It’s your partner.”

The chair legs grated on the patio as Frank grabbed the phone and strode inside. It wasn’t good news. Zoe watched him pace to and fro, gesturing wildly, angry, dragging his fingers through his hair.

“It’s not good,” Emma said.

“No, it isn’t.”

“I hope Mom and Carl are all right.”

Guilt slapped Zoe upside the head. She’d been thinking the call was about her. It could be anything... anything bad, that is. Frank had other cases, too. Maybe Theo was briefing him on those or getting his input. Maybe DiCarlo had taken a turn for the worse.

Kate and his parents gathered around. The twisted expressions on their faces broadcast it was very bad news. Kate was crying. When Frank ended the call, they pressed forward, all talking at once. Then they looked Zoe’s way. It *was* about her. Something awful. She could see it in his face. Her parents? Alicia? She could

## TO DIE FOR

barely breathe.

Frank walked out, his face shadowed by whatever dire news was about to destroy Zoe's world. She wanted to wave him away, to stop time, cover her ears, run, and burrow under the covers until hell froze over... anything not to hear this. What had she done to deserve this torment? Saved a police officer's life. Protected her own. She'd never hurt anyone, kept to herself, struggled to improve her life. Loved kids and animals. And Frank. Oh God, how she loved Frank.

The chair legs skidded over the flagstones. "Emma, Zoe and I need a moment. She left without pause or question."

"No." Zoe shook her head and started to move away.

He sat before her, taking both hands in his, eyes on hers. "Honey... someone set fire to your house last night." He slowly shook his head, looking like he wanted to cry. "There's nothing left."

*Nothing left. Nothing.* "Your... car." She'd lost everything and all she could process was that his car had been destroyed, too.

"Totaled."

"I need.. " She'd lost everything. It was unimaginable. Everything. No, she was alive. Had she been there... Had *they* been there...

Panic raced her heart. A suppressed scream burned deep in her lungs. "I can't stay here. It's too dangerous."

He squeezed her fingers, helping her stay put when all Zoe wanted to do was run screaming into the trees. "No, you can't. The girls are going to stay here with my parents. We're leaving just as soon as we can pack. Theo's got a safe house."

"No." She shook her head. His girls. She was forcing him to choose her over them. Zoe refused. "Your vacation. It means so

## TO DIE FOR

much to the three of you. I won't come between you."

"You think any of us care about that?" He cupped her face between his palms, drawing them nearer. "Zoe, Kate's inside hysterical over your safety. She's in there stuffing all our things into our suitcases. Stacey and I have been divorced for sixteen years. In all that time, none of them have seen me with another woman, heard about me dating another woman, heard me even talk about another woman. Don't you think they realize how much you mean to me? Zoe... I love you."

Tears streamed down her cheeks and over his fingers. The devastation in his face had to match hers. Zoe couldn't bear it.

"But... I want children. I need children." It might be ridiculous to focus on something like that right now, but she'd lost everything. Zoe couldn't lose the hope of having children one day with a man she loved.

"We'll have kids, honey. Dozens of kids. All the kids you want." He was crying now, and it broke her heart. "Babies. We'll fill the house with babies. We'll go home and move all your stuff into my place today."

A strangled sob ripped from her chest. "I don't have any stuff left. I don't have anything left."

"Oh, honey... you have me." He hauled her effortlessly onto his lap. "You'll always have me."

\* \* \*

Between the girls and Frank's parents, Zoe and Frank were on the road in less than fifteen minutes. Leaving them was one of the hardest things Zoe had ever had to do. Devastation twisted their faces. She knew they felt helpless. So did she. It would be so easy

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to stay here, presumably safe from the world. Doing so would only put the Ludwigs at risk. Zoe was a threat to everyone around her. Whoever wanted her dead wasn't going to stop until the job was done. She was glad her family was gone, but worried what might happen if this wasn't resolved before they all returned home in a few days.

She made Frank call Stacey and warn her and Carl. Stacey's threat to kick someone's ass warmed Zoe's heart. Frank was a lucky man. By default, that made Zoe lucky, too. She prayed that luck held out long enough for her to enjoy the life they were apparently building.

Moving in together. A huge step. Children, even bigger. Love was there. But the suddenness of all this wasn't real. It was Frank's own reaction to disaster. He was a hero, trying to make things better, to protect his woman. There'd be time enough later to sort it out and allow Frank a graceful retreat if he wanted it.

Talking with her sister helped Zoe calm down. Like Frank, Alicia excelled when dealing with a crisis. She was the calm in the storm, taking charge, making plans, deciding the next steps. She'd already called the insurance company, reminded Zoe that all her important papers were in a safety deposit box and that she had little of value in the house. Any family mementos like photos could be replaced from their parents' albums. Any knickknacks were dust collectors Zoe hadn't put out in years. Then Alicia added that Zoe had been in sore need of a wardrobe change for a very long time. It was going to be all right.

Nothing was said about why the arson had happened in the first place. It was just as well. By the time she and Frank were halfway home, a suspect was in custody—Valerie Katz. Zoe didn't believe it. A woman of her caliber with so much at risk?

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“I don’t buy it,” she told him. “That’s a huge leap for someone to make. What purpose would it serve her to destroy my house or kill me?”

“Who knows. But they have evidence to support the arrest, honey.” He lifted his palm, then dropped it over the steering wheel. “Witnesses put her outside your house last night. Theo says she went to the door, knocked, then waited in her car for over an hour. Your neighbors say she didn’t look happy. When she was questioned, detectives found two empty gas cans in her trunk.”

“Motive?” Yes, Zoe had decked her—in self-defense—and reported her actions during their insane press day.

“She saw you as a threat? Blamed you for her missteps? The whack on her head scrambled her brain?” He shrugged. “I don’t know, but I suspect we’ll find out.”

Zoe twisted around to face him. “What about Rico? Someone needs to connect the dots for me, Frank, because this makes no sense. I don’t care what evidence your people think they have. It is inconceivable that separate individuals would have it in for me. It makes more sense that I have a deranged fan, which still doesn’t explain Rico. Has he come to yet?”

She watched him process the information, then tap the Bluetooth in his ear.

“Hey, Theo, any word on Rico?” Fingers flexed over the steering wheel. “Yeah, check on him and let me know. Zoe and I aren’t buying Valerie Katz for this. It doesn’t fit an arsonist’s profile. The majority of arsonists are white, male. It’s also out of character. If Katz wanted to get even with Zoe for anything, she’d either go after her job or make a move on me.”

Damn, she loved this man!

She brushed her fingers over his thigh when he disconnected

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the call. "Thank you."

"No need. You're one hundred percent correct. It's sloppy police work born of desperation to find the person who's threatening the city's heroine of the moment."

Zoe laughed, scattering those storm clouds hovering over her life. "They'll be making a movie of me soon."

Frank's eyes narrowed, his head cocked to one side. "I wonder who'll play me."

She damned the seat belt that kept her in place. "I can't think of one actor who can match your raw heroism and devastatingly handsome features."

"Wow!" A wide grin split his face. "You really know how to pump up a guy's ego."

"Among other things." She'd dropped her voice to a husky lure, watching his erection swell his jeans.

"Let's hold that thought for later." He readjusted his package, then grabbed her hand and drew her fingers to his lips for a kiss. "Much later, since we might not have that much privacy at this safe house."

"Since the police already have a presumed suspect in custody, will they still authorize a safe house?"

He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles as he stared into growing traffic. "Probably not. We'll hole up at a hotel if we have to or, better yet, my house with the neighborhood watch on full alert. Nothing's going to get past Hetty or Ira."

But then this person would know where Frank lived. Zoe scoffed. That had already happened.

"I want to go by my house, please. I need to see it for myself." She braced herself for argument when Frank released her hand.

"Arson investigators are still processing the scene. It should be



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well guarded.” He nodded slowly. “Yeah... we’ll go there first.”

“Thank you.” She added a smile as an afterthought, even if his eyes were focused on the freeway and he couldn’t see it. “You really are a first-class hero.”

There was no smile back, not even a glimmer. “Yeah, it’s about time. Lately, I sure as hell haven’t felt like one. But that’s okay. I’m gonna make up for that now.”

There it was—the elephant in the backseat. “Is that what this is about... your need to prove yourself?”

“No... yes... I don’t know.” He scrunched up his face. “I watched you dragged at gunpoint from the hospital and could do nothing. I watched a madman try to run you down and could do nothing. And I don’t even want to think about what happened last night.”

“Oh, Frank.” *Poor guy.* “I don’t need you to be my hero.” Which was a full-fledged lie. “I just need you to be the man who—”

“Spanks you?”

\* \* \*

Frank knew he’d fucked up. He’d known he was going to before the words left his mouth, but he couldn’t stop them. All he could think about was how he’d failed at protecting her and how he’d finally found a way to help her through this latest threat, a way to be the hero he wanted to be for her. Only to hear her tell him she didn’t need him to be a hero. In fact, the only thing she’d asked of him at all was the one thing he refused to consider. He’d even caved on the issue of children—without regret.

Realizing Zoe could have been home when the house was set

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ablaze made him realize he couldn't bear a world without her in it. He desperately needed the hope of having a part of Zoe with him always—desperately needed her babies.

Oh, but he regretted throwing the last words out there. The temperature in the truck cab dropped to below freezing.

“Zoe... I didn't mean that.”

“Yeah, you did.” No tears, just cold disdain. It scared him to death. “I trusted you with a sexual fantasy, and you threw it in my face.”

*Just like Xavier.* The unspoken words hovered in the air between them. They didn't need to be said.

“I'm sorry. I... It won't happen again.”

“No, it won't. We're done.”

He fought to keep the truck on the road while pain lanced his heart. “Zoe—”

“Don't open your mouth and make it worse. I have no qualms about leaving you on the side of the road with your luggage.”

Now that pissed him off. “A killer is after you and you want to leave your only protection on the side of the road? That would make you too stupid to live.”

“You... *ass.*” Acid fell with the words. Dread crawled down his spine. “I have a black belt, I'm an expert marksman, and I have pepper spray and a kubaton a hand's grasp away at a moment's notice. I don't need to be *protected*. I don't need you for anything. In fact, if I feel like a little smack and tickle, I can smack and tickle myself very nicely, thank you very much.”

The images that conjured had him bone hard. He clutched the wheel to keep from shifting his erection to a more comfortable position.

“It's all I can do to let you drive my truck, much less be in the

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same vehicle with you right now.”

Anger edged out hard-on. “Fine. You want to drive, you can drive.” He whipped across two lanes to catch the nearest exit. She didn’t gasp, didn’t protest, didn’t beg him for anything. It only made him madder. He pulled into a Denny’s off the exit, slammed the gearshift into park, and shouldered the door open.

“Wonderful.” She met him at the tailgate. Fire danced in her eyes. Mad as he was, Frank wanted her... here and now. Her nostrils flared. She felt it, too, that passion that bound them together.

“Don’t think you can fuck this one away.” Zoe gave him a hard shove and skirted to the driver’s side. The engine roared to life. “Either get in or get the hell out of my way. I’m leaving now,” she yelled through the open window.

Frank did the only thing he could do. He vaulted the tailgate and wedged himself against the cab.

“God, *you* are too stupid to live,” she told him.

At that moment he felt like it.

“I have a perfect driving record. I’m not going to let you ruin it,” she added. A few seconds lapsed, then, “How will it look for you if you’re ticketed for riding in the open bed of a truck?”

Muttering curses, he leaped from the bed and got into the cab.

“I swear, you can be such a child,” she snapped.

Frank parked his elbow on the rest and scratched his chin. “Yeah, maybe someone should spank me,” he replied sarcastically.

“Maybe they should.”

They sat there in silence, engine idling, diners inside the restaurant watching their fight play out.

Zoe snickered first. Next thing Frank knew, they were laughing so hard they were crying. They’d recover only to start all over

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again. He flicked his seat belt open, draped his arm over her seat, and leaned as close as the console allowed.

“I’m sorry. Forgive me?”

“I’ll think about it. But you still don’t get to drive my truck.”

But she did accept a kiss, then another... and another.

## CHAPTER 11

*Total loss.* Seeing the charred skeletal remains of her house, those words hit hard and made Zoe sick inside. Crime scene tape cordoned off the area. The roof had collapsed to the side and front, adding fuel to the inferno, yet somehow leaving the back and left wall standing. Maybe the kitchen appliances and porcelain bathrooms fixtures insulated those walls and were what kept Frank's car from exploding. The scorched elm tree testified it was a hot fire. It was an extra blessing no other houses were affected. A true testament to the firefighters' skill.

She stayed in the truck while Frank spoke with the arson investigator and looked at the different things the man pointed out to him. There really wasn't much sense in her looking around; nothing was salvageable. As for her relationship with Frank...

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Couples fought—that was a fact. In the end, each of them had realized how silly the whole thing was, but they still needed to learn not to lash out when they were feeling frightened, defenseless, helpless, or whatever. Harsh words hurt as much as physical blows. If they were going to make this work, they needed to learn to work together, not take offense over their own perceived inadequacies.

Zoe yawned and stretched her tired muscles. Frank had dozed off during the rest of the drive. Neither of them had gotten much sleep the night before and that, coupled with everything else, was wearing on them both. She wanted this all behind her so she could get back to a normal life or whatever normal was going to be for her now.

*Babies. We'll fill the house with babies.*

“You’re such a beautiful liar when you’re scared, Frank Ludwig.” It had been fear talking. His bumbling attempt to make things better, to be her hero. Much preferable than the hateful things they’d thrown at each other later.

The men wandered toward the back of the house. She saw Frank yank his cell phone from his jeans pocket. This was going to take a while. Zoe locked the doors, tilted her seat back, and closed her eyes.

She woke to find Frank leaning against the hood of the vehicle. He smiled when he saw her stretch, then motioned to the door. Still groggy, Zoe unlocked it. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

He filled the space with his body. “You needed the rest.”

“How long was I out?” She flicked the key to check the time. “Two hours?”

He shrugged it off. “It’s been a busy two hours. I’ll fill you in on the way home. Who’s driving?”

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Zoe had punished him enough. “You.” She crawled over the console and into the passenger’s seat. “Is this news I’m going to want to hear?”

“Most definitely.” He slid into place, fastened his seat belt, and started the truck. “Rico came to. Xavier’s mother put the hit out on you.”

Sunlight glinting off a passing car temporarily blinded her. Zoe flicked the sleep from the corners of her eyes, then slid her sunglasses on. “That makes as much sense as Valerie Katz setting fire to my house.”

“Rico said Elena wanted the woman responsible for killing Xavier eliminated. She said any person who did so would be well rewarded. They’re bringing her in for questioning.”

She’d like to be a fly on the wall for that interrogation.

“As for Katz...” Frank paused at the intersection, looked both ways, then drove through. “Techs found fingerprints on the cans, did a quick comparison with Katz’s and they don’t match. Those same fingerprints were found on her trunk. She’s free. Her attorney is threatening to sue the department for God only knows what.”

“Any clue why she was at my house?”

“She said she came to apologize and still intends to do so. She blames the concussion for her behavior and has a doctor’s statement to back her up. She wants to know if you’d be willing to talk with her privately. No cameras, no attorneys, no co-workers.”

“No way.” Zoe would be happy if she never saw the woman again.

“My feelings exactly, but the department might feel differently,” Frank said. “They’ll want a peaceful resolution. They might also make it a condition of her continued employment.”

Valerie would hound Zoe until she got what she needed. Zoe

## TO DIE FOR

wouldn't know a moment's peace. How long before she was ambused in the ladies room again? "I'll think about it."

"Anyway, Rico failed, so Elena hired someone else."

"Someone who tried to frame Katz." *A stupid someone who left their fingerprints behind.*

"We'll learn all the specifics once we get Elena Sanchez in custody. Those prints are in the queue for the lab to run. We'll have a name behind them soon enough."

It was finally over. She could get on with her life, rebuild. Go shopping.

"Hungry?" Frank asked.

Starving, but... "I want to go ho—" Odd that it felt so natural to call Frank's house her home. "I want to go home. Or back to Palm Springs to finish the vacation. I was looking forward to doing a little hiking, poking around the shops, maybe going to The Living Desert or to see the Palm Springs Follies. Did you let your family know everything's all right?"

"Called everyone. The girls, my parents, Stacey. I even took the liberty of talking to your parents."

Zoe should have known. It was only a matter of time. "Did you now?"

"Of course. You were resting, and I knew you wouldn't want them to worry any more than they already had." He stopped for a red light, fingers drumming on the wheel. "It's only right they talk to the man who's going to marry their daughter."

Why was she not shocked? The man was impossible. "I haven't said yes."

"You haven't said no either."

"I haven't been officially asked."

"My bad." Through the green light. "I'm asking officially



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now.”

“So much for romantic gestures.”

He glanced her way. “You told me once you weren’t much for romantic gestures. That you didn’t trust them. Why do you think it’s taken me so long to let you know how I feel?”

Frank was right about that. Xavier had romanced her. Zoe couldn’t stand the smell of flowers anymore. Carnations... he’d always given her carnations.

“Children,” she said, searching for the words to fully broach the subject.

“Two at least,” he replied. “I’m not particular about the sex.”

“Frank, you don’t—”

He raised his palm to stop her, then pulled into a strip mall parking lot and faced her fully. “I’ve loved you from the second I met you, Zoe White. I knew you were the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with and I’ve been floundering over myself trying to get up the courage to make a move. Granted, I’m still making missteps where we’re concerned. I’m only human, only a man. Or, as my loving daughter pointed out... ” He left that part unsaid and draped his arm across the console until his fingers could brush her cheek.

“Kids were the farthest thing from my mind. I wanted you. I love how it feels to be buried inside you. Loved that I could wake up and you’d be in my arms. Love you so much it feels like I’ll go crazy if I can’t see you.”

Tears glistened in his eyes. Zoe blinked hers away. Her heart thumped so loudly she was afraid she wouldn’t be able to hear him.

“You’ve been held hostage, nearly run over, and to imagine what would have happened if you’d been home... ” He dropped

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his head. Zoe watched a tear splash on the console. When he looked up again, they were trickling down his face. “I want those babies. I need them. I need to know I’ll have a part of you with me always. I want to watch them grow. I want to see your smile on their faces, hold their hands, wrap their little arms—”

She pressed her fingers over his mouth. “Yes,” she choked out. “Yes, I’ll marry you.” Zoe kissed him, softly at first, then slipped her tongue between his lips and claimed her man. “Take me home.”

“My pleasure, honey.” He eased away and put the truck in gear.

“And then there’s one more thing I need you to do.”

His hand skimmed up her thigh. “Anything.”

“I need you to go to Elena’s interview. I need answers.”

Frank stared at her for a few seconds and she half-expected him to counter with sex. Instead, he gave a nod. “Will do.”

“I’ll use the time to settle in, make change of address notifications and all that.”

“I’ll show you where the gun safe is and give you the combination. With kids in the neighborhood, I really like to keep the weapons secure. Skateboard kid showed us all how vulnerable we can be.”

Zoe agreed with that. Twenty bucks had bribed the boy to flatten her tires, being offered money to take a weapon wasn’t inconceivable. The issue of Valerie Katz still nagged at her. “As much as I hate the idea, I’d like to get this meeting with Valerie Katz over. Can you arrange that? On my terms, not hers. It’s today or not at all.”

Frank made the call.

\* \* \*

## *TO DIE FOR*

Elena Sanchez was an imposing woman. Gold earrings dripped from her sagging lobes, ribbons of gold ringed her neck, jeweled rings graced each finger, band after band encircled her wrists. She was indeed a queen from another time, staring down her nose at everyone who was beneath her. She'd been sitting in Interview Room 1 for an hour, back ramrod straight in that metal chair, and had yet to utter a word. Her diminutive attorney sat by her side, equally as silent.

Frank stood on the other side of the glass watching Theo and Navarro try to find a niche in her gold-plated armor.

“Okay.” Theo slapped his palms hard on the table. No one flinched. They were hardcore individuals, unafraid of intimidation. “I’m going to lay it all out for you, Mrs. Sanchez... Mr. Jackson. Rico Olivera says you hired him to kill Zoe White.”

Elena sniffed. “Why would I bother with that little mouse? She’s insignificant. Barely a speck of dust. Oh, I got Xavier’s message loud and clear when he was with the little fool.” Another snort of derision. “Thinking he could take his anger of me out on her.” Amusement lifted one brow. “He could beat her senseless, beat her to death for all I cared. It wasn’t me, so what did I care? If she was foolish enough to take it... ” A shrug passed the incident off as nothing.

The hell of it was, she meant it. Frank could see that on her face.

“Rico says you told him the woman responsible for your son’s death needed to be eliminated and you’d reward the person who did so.”

Her bosom jiggled with her huge sigh. “What I said was that the woman responsible for Xavier’s death needed to pay. Nothing more. Why he went after that weak-willed little—”

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“Because you hold the reins, you hold the power, you hold the purse strings. You decreed Zoe White pay, and Rico did your bidding.”

She and her attorney exchanged a sidelong glance. Slight nods conveyed an understanding between them.

Elena’s grin spread slowly, a viper ready to attack. “I’m ready to make a full statement of facts as I know them to be. I want each and every word documented.”

“Because you’re only saying this one time?” Theo replied sarcastically.

Her grin widened, eyes sparkling with glee. “Oh, I intend to tell this story over and over again. I’ve waited a very long time. My son is dead. My future secure. I won’t be silent any longer.”

The woman was insane.

The door to Observation opened. Carson walked in. “You aren’t going to believe this one.”

Frank would believe anything at this point. “Go on.”

“Josh Douglas’s prints are all over Katz’s car.”

“Of course they are. He does everything except piss and shit for her.” Valerie told him how high and he jumped... every single time.

“All over the gas cans. They’re looking for him now.”

*Fuck!* “Zoe’s alone.”

“Oh... I don’t think his target was Zoe. I think he saw a chance to get even with Katz and took it. Valerie was dragging him down with her over the hospital incident, blaming him for the lack of protection. Psych eval won’t clear him for duty. He went more nuts yesterday ranting that he’d lost everything because of *that little blonde bitch*. Then Robertson told him, ‘Yeah, join the club.’ Josh went crazy and stormed off before anyone could calm him down.”

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“He could’ve killed Zoe.”

“If he was following Valerie, he’d know Zoe wasn’t home. Hell, most of us knew she was with you in Palm Springs. Why that information escaped Valerie’s attention...”

*Because it wasn’t about her.*

“We’re ready whenever you are, Mrs. Sanchez,” Theo said.

“She giving it up?” Carson asked.

“We’ll see.”

“Woman scares the fuck out of me,” he mumbled.

That malevolent grin didn’t help. “Rico was always a slow child,” she said. “Too many hits on the head, I suppose. When I said I wanted the woman responsible for Xavier’s death to pay, I didn’t mean Zoe White. I meant Valerie Katz. Nothing would please me more than her complete and utter destruction.” Hatred replaced the grin. A look so filled with malice the paint on the walls started to peel.

“The little princess. Kitty Katz.” She feigned a spit. “He called her that. The little bitch. She ruined my boy’s life, burrowed under his skin like a flesh-eating parasite, and he was too foolish to see. After all she’d done, he still went back to her. Oh, he blamed *me*.” She stabbed her fingers against her chest. “He wasn’t even man enough to tell me that to my face. He found his little substitute and took it out on her. I felt sorry for her at first, but she was stupid enough to stay.”

Frank wanted to claw through the glass and rip the woman’s heart out. She knew what Zoe was going through and did nothing to help her.

“I made sure that one didn’t birth his child either.”

What the fuck was she saying? *She* made sure Zoe lost her baby?

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“Excuse me?” Theo leaned forward.

“It was easier because I had the control this time. Money changed hands. A simple procedure while she was under. The little bastard was gone.” Jeweled fingers flashed through the air. “I refuse to have a grandchild who has less than stellar qualities running through his blood.”

“Because your fucking son was so fucking perfect?” Frank yelled at the glass.

Carson dragged him back. “Calm down. Let her talk. Don’t screw this up.”

“I presume from your statement that you’ve done this before?”

“I didn’t.” She splayed her hand against the base of her throat. “Little Miss Kitty took care of that one herself, with the help of her parents, of course. For very good reasons.”

“Holy shit,” Carson muttered. “Katz is a big voice with Right To Life. There’s been talk of pushing her into congress. If this is true—”

“You’re telling us that a woman of Valerie—”

“She wasn’t a woman then. She was a skinny sixteen-year-old slut who spread her whoring legs for every male who crossed her path. Still does from what I hear. Xavier was a boy, easily lead by his cock... as all men are. I haven’t seen a man yet who was immune to her charms when she turned them on.”

“Wonder how her attorney feels about that?” Frank said.

“I shouldn’t complain.” Elena smoothed her unruffled hair. “The disastrous affair left me very wealthy. The last thing the congressman and his wife wanted was the world to discover their precious angel had been sleeping with the son of their illegal immigrant housekeeper.”

That explained how the woman got her money to start her

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business.

“I agreed to stay quiet,” she said. “But now my son’s dead, and she’s responsible. The woman’s ambition knows no bounds. She would stop at nothing to get what she wants. Just like her father.” Tears filled her eyes. “Xavier’s father. *Their* father. That’s a pregnancy that should never have been either. I was a fool, too late, too in love, too blinded. And still I went with him when he married *her*.”

The grin returned, demonic, determined, laced with revenge Frank wasn’t sure she didn’t deserve to get. “Imagine Mrs. Katz’s horror when she finally learned the truth—our children... lovers... *siblings*.” She hissed the word. “She was paid off handsomely, too.” Her chin came up; cold black eyes stared down her nose. “I tried to make my son better than his father. All the beatings in the world didn’t help. I told him about who she really was. It didn’t matter. He blamed me. *Me*. He wouldn’t stay away from her. Called me a liar.

“Princess Kitty always wanted what she couldn’t have. She lured him to taunt me and her parents, spent hours in a tanning bed to make herself look Mexican, wore a scraggly wig—heaven forbid she dye her pretty blonde hair—and shared his bed, even while he took his rage out on that pathetic creature. Now he’s dead, and I blame *them*. I will ruin them all and there isn’t anything those Katzes can do to stop me. No matter what they threaten to do. I can do much, much worse.”

“Fuck,” Carson gasped out. “It was Valerie Katz! She’s the third one in the video of that convenience store robbery. *She’s* the one Sanchez and Olivera went down for.”

And she was on her way to Frank’s house. “I gotta go. Valerie’s on her way to my house to talk to Zoe. Alone.” And he

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was stupid to have arranged it.

“I’m coming with you.” Carson dogged his heels.

Maybe he could catch Zoe before Valerie got there and tell her to not let the woman in the house. Frank speed dialed her cell as he walked. “Pick up. Pick up.”

Voice mail clicked over.



## CHAPTER 12

Zoe did a thorough reconnaissance of Frank's house. The handguns were locked up, but weapons were only a grasp away—everyday items that would do in a pinch. Scissors in the drawers in every room, a block of butcher knives, pens in holders, heavy knickknacks that fit nicely in the palm, a baseball bat in the front closet, corkscrews. Zoe still slipped the edge of her key ring in her back jeans pocket. She might have agreed to meet with Valerie, but she didn't trust her. She wanted her kubaton within easy reach.

Hetty and Ira stood watch from their homes. The rest of the neighbor was on alert, bats, air horns, and whistles at the ready.

A soft *thunk* announced Valerie's arrival. Zoe peeked through the window. Valerie wore skin-tight jeans, snow-white sneakers, and a Raiders T-shirt. Her blonde hair was raked into a ponytail,

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making her face taut, skeletal. It was out of character, a clear disguise... if she hadn't been driving a cherry red Mazda Miata.

Zoe wasn't going to let her past the front porch. She stuffed her cell phone in her front pocket, double-checked the security of the key ring in the back, and opened the door. Valerie's step faltered. It gave Zoe the time she needed to cut the distance between them. Forget the front porch. She wasn't going to let Valerie any farther than the edge of the lawn. Movement flickered in the window catty-corner from Frank's house—Hetty keeping a close watch. She was probably on the phone coordinating with someone else.

“You wanted to see me. Here I am. This is as private as I intend to get with you. Apology accepted. Go away.”

Valerie stood there, mouth pinched, fine lines spoking out from her lips. Zoe would have walked away, but she didn't dare turn her back on the woman. The sound of running water reached her ears—Ira watering the roses between his house and Frank's.

Across the street, Kimmie Allison waddled outside, her two little white poodles straining their leashes. The labs a couple houses down were probably on high alert. Somewhere, a chihuahua's shrill nip carried from within its house. The black labs were silent, waiting.

Bernie Spears jogged by, acknowledging Zoe with a jerk of his chin. His German shepherd trotted by his side, leashed and she figured in full voice command, ready to defend. Her future children would be very safe in this neighborhood.

“If you'll excuse me,” Zoe forced a politeness she didn't feel, “I have some shopping to do. It seems I'm suddenly sort of clothing.” She started to move away. Valerie snapped her hand over Zoe's arm.

Hetty shot from her front door, air horn raised high.

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"I can help you with that," Valerie said, "if you'll help me."

Zoe looked her up and down. "I hardly think we're the same size."

Valerie's lip curled, as if the very thought made her nauseous. "I was talking about money."

"Money?" Why would Valerie want to give her money? Guilt?

"Of course I would need something in return."

Zoe studied her through narrowed vision. "Such as?"

Valerie squared her shoulders. "Your silence."

So they were back to the Internal Affairs investigation. "Look... I already gave my statement. I'm not going to retract it. I told the truth."

Her nostrils flared. "I wasn't talking about that. God... you don't even recognize me, do you?"

"I don't understand." Her cell phone shuddered. Zoe let it go to voice mail.

Valerie back-stepped toward her Miata. "Never mind."

A white two-door sedan crept down the street, drawing the attention of the neighborhood watch. Skateboard kid zipped by. "He's got a gun!"

The weapon swung through the open window, clutched in Josh Douglas's white-knuckled grip. Valerie glanced up, eyes wide. Josh's target couldn't be any clearer.

"Valerie, duck!" Zoe screamed and dived for the woman.

Hetty's air horn drowned out the engine. The shepherd shot toward the car in a blur of brown fur and white teeth. He launched himself in the air and clamped his jaws over Josh's forearm. Josh screamed and tried to shake the dog off. The shepherd tightened the hold, rear legs braced against the side of the car. Skateboard kid tossed spike strips in its path. Rims spit sparks and gouged

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rivets in the concrete. The car careened to a halt.

Josh scrambled from the vehicle, or rather the shepherd dragged him from the car. The poodles were on him seconds later, latching onto the cuffs of his gun-metal gray trousers. He toppled to his knees, flailing arms and legs to rid himself of the canine force.

“Break,” Bernie commanded. All three dogs sat on their haunches, eyes locked on target, teeth barred, growls warning Josh against any foolhardy action. They didn’t back down until Hetty straddled him and Ira secured his wrists in plasticuffs. It was one hell of a takedown.

“You all right?” She helped Valerie to her feet.

“Yeah.” She didn’t look like it. She looked scared to death. Zoe knew that feeling and hated to admit she felt sorry for the woman.

“He’s gone insane.” Valerie’s voice was loud enough for everyone to hear.

What little sympathy Zoe had for her disappeared.

“Don’t listen to her!” Josh struggled to be free of Ira’s weight. “She set you up for Sanchez! She’s the one who ordered me to set fire to your house.”

“He’s lying, of course.” Valerie smoothed stray tendrils of hair back into the ponytail.

Zoe’s cell phone vibrated again. She motioned to Ira to watch the woman and stepped away to answer. It was Frank.

“Don’t let Valerie Katz in the house,” he said in a rush of breath.

“Uhm... you’re a little late. Already here. Josh, too, nice and secure,” she replied with a calmness she sure as hell didn’t feel.

“Secure her, too. I’m on my way home.”

“No need to hurry. Everything’s under control. I think the

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entire neighborhood is here right now... bearing gifts... and arms. Don't worry. I handled it."

"God, I love you."

"I love you, too." More than she could say. "The cops are on the way."

"I won't be far behind them."

"Josh says he set fire to my house at Valerie's direction. She says he's a liar. Honestly... this makes no sense. She offered me money to keep quiet, then said I didn't recognize her."

"I'll explain it all when I get there. It's not pretty."

Zoe eyed Valerie, who stilled fussed with her hair, then Josh, now sobbing on the curb. "No, I think we need to talk now."

Braced against the front door, Zoe listened, never once taking her eyes off Valerie. The police pulled up, ascertained the situation, stuffed Josh in the back of a cruiser, then stalked toward Valerie.

"I gotta go," she told Frank. "I want her to know exactly why they're hauling her ass in."

"Go for it. I'm here. Four doors down."

The knowledge shored her up.

"Valerie Katz, you're under arrest for suspicion of armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon," the officer told her.

Her laughter wove through the houses, scattering birds that had returned in the wake of the police sirens. "Eddie, come on. It's me."

In the event she skirted the charges because the statute of limitations had run out, Zoe added, "You're going to want to add arson, accessory to kidnapping, extortion, accessory after the fact to murder." Zoe's poor renters. "Blackmail might not be outside the realm of possibilities either." She walked toward her. "It's

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over, Valerie. Elena Sanchez told the police everything. *Everything*. Rico Olivera's helping fill in the old gaps. You'd be shocked to learn how many people are coming forward to fill in more recent gaps."

Eddie secured her wrists. Valerie didn't break.

"I hated him." Cold, crazy eyes locked onto Zoe. "Probably as much as you did."

Zoe didn't think that was possible.

"I gave him *me*, and he had the nerve to threaten me? Told me to deliver you or else. What the hell was I supposed to do? I thought I was shed of you. But no. There you were back again. Being the martyr. You with your to-die-for voice and body. Making him want you." Her lip curled in a sneer. "I used to love to watch him beat you. He hated that he wanted you so much."

Memories flooded Zoe's head and made her sick inside. She saw herself cowering, taking the hits, too weak physically and emotionally to defend herself. Him hitting her over and over. Valerie waited for a response or some sign her words had hurt. Zoe wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing the nightmare she'd resurrected.

"You're no different than me," Valerie said. "You slept with him, same as I did."

Again, Zoe felt a little sorry for her... very little. "Not the same. He wasn't *my* brother."

"Shut up!" She lunged for Zoe. Eddie grappled her into place. Valerie thrashed against the hold. Eddie twisted until she crumpled facedown onto the lawn. "Lies! Lies! You ruined my life before, Elena. You ruined everything. You won't do it again!"

"I'm not Elena, Valerie," Zoe replied calmly.

She froze in mid-thrash, eyes wide, chin quivering. Zoe

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wondered if Valerie realized the truth. She kept her head high as Eddie hauled her to her feet and led her away.

Frank jogged up, Carson not far behind. He swept his gaze over the scene, then hurried Zoe's way.

"You really don't need a hero, do you?" he said with a laugh.

Zoe walked into his open arms and nestled into his broad chest. It let her hide mounting tears. "Only you."

"I think that was a compliment." He kissed her head.

"It was." She dropped her voice to that husky lure she knew drove him crazy. At least she hoped she did. Her insides shook with the force of a magnitude seven earthquake.

"You're the strongest woman I know." He cradled her to him, big hands caressing her back. "You don't know how relieved that makes me feel. I didn't realize it myself until you told me you had everything under control. You're a survivor, your own hero. You're never going to take foolish chances. Our kids are going to be... amazing."

Damned if he wasn't going to make her bawl. "With a dad like you, they can't help be anything else." She tightened her hold on him. "I'm still shaking."

"Don't say that too loudly or Hetty will be shoving cookies down your throat."

"Really?" She looked up. "I love cookies."

He smirked. "I can think of much better things to put in your mouth."

"Oh, my God," she whispered, "you *are* a horndog."

"Only for you, honey."

He kissed her quickly, gave her bottom a little pat, then stepped to one side so Eddie could take her statement. News vans had started to swarm the periphery of the scene.

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“Could you do me a favor?” she asked Frank.

His hand warmed her lower back. “Honey, I’d do anything for you.”

Zoe jerked her head toward the news people. “Take care of that for me. I’d like to go shopping once this is done and I’d prefer they not be up my ass trying to determine what size panty I wear.”

“You got it.” He gave her bottom another pat and charged off.

Love warmed her core. Pulling in a sigh, she gave her attention to a flush-faced Eddie.

\* \* \*

Zoe wrestled her packages through the front door. She’d hit every store in the outlet mall and shopped until she was ready to drop. But it was the scent of roast beef and the trail of pink rose petals leading toward the dining room that stopped her cold.

“Oh, Frank, what have you done?” He knew how she felt about romantic gestures. Now this? Nausea churned her stomach; fear and uncertainty raced her heart.

“That you, honey?” he called from the vicinity of the kitchen.

“Yes.” She kicked her packages to one side.

“Great, I’ve put the finishing touches on dinner. Come see.”

Skirting the trail of roses, Zoe edged forward. Votive candles flickered on the living room tables, shimmering on the glossy dark wood. Barely-there music drifted from the speakers. *The Phantom of the Opera*, her favorite movie lost in the fire with the rest of her adored collection. He’d bought the DVD. She glanced toward the entertainment system. A stack of DVDs lay on the shelf. *Chicago* was there, along with *Evita*, *Grease* and all her favorite Christmas movies. CDs from Eagles, Nickelback, Black-eyed Peas, Adam



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Lambert, Rihanna, and the soundtracks from every musical she'd ever loved.

Zoe pressed her hand over her mouth to stifle a sob. He'd really listened to her these last six months.

"Honey?"

She blinked away the tears and continued. Tapered white candles danced in crystal holders on a dining room table covered with a peach-colored linen tablecloth and a bouquet of pastel tea roses. He'd set the table, not with fine china but Corelle in the blue iris pattern she loved and was next to impossible to find. Bamboo shaped stainless steel flatware sat next to the plates. He had them sitting across from each other, the candles at the sides of their place settings so the flicker would enhance, not obscure their view of one another. A bottle of pinot noir was open and breathing. Roast beef was carved, waiting on the platter next to fresh asparagus drizzled with what looked like balsamic vinegar.

He stepped through the kitchen door bearing a smile and a bowl of little red potatoes, glistening with butter and sprinkled with dill. "How was shopping?"

"Excellent," she managed to say. "You've been busy. What... where..."

"Never underestimate the force of the neighborhood watch. They helped me with my little scavenger hunt. The dinner's all mine, as is the atmosphere." He set the bowl on the table, then pulled out her chair.

Zoe slid into it and closed her eyes when he nuzzled her cheek.

"I know how you feel about standard romantic gestures, honey. But he stole too much from you. It's time to take it back, starting right now. I will never hurt you; never raise a hand to you. You've done everything in your power to heal yourself and get beyond

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what happened. But there are some things you can't do on your own. This is one of them. Let me bumble my way through and give you back romance, Zoe. I love romance. I love romantic gestures. Trust me to do this for you... for us."

She did trust him. The words wouldn't come. All she could do was nod. Frank kissed her cheek and sat across from her. She pulled in a shaky breath and watched him pour the wine into the stemware.

"Everything looks and smells wonderful."

"I love to cook."

"The music, the movies..." Zoe traced her finger over the iris design on her plate. "You're very thorough and observant."

"I'd like to take full credit for being all that; after all, I am a detective. The truth is I was nosy and poked around your house while you were sleeping that first morning. I'm glad I did now. I wanted this night to be as perfect as possible. I knew you wanted to go back to Palm Springs and since we wouldn't be alone for the rest of the week, I wanted us to have something special."

"It is, love." She reached for his hand, then clutched it when he laced his fingers through hers.

"I draw the line at picking out a woman's engagement ring," he said softly. "You should have the one you want, not one I presume you might like."

"If it's all the same to you," she sniffled, "I'd like to jump right to the wedding bands. I understand they have chapels in Palm Springs."

"Your parents and Alicia will be back..."

"In a few days."

"I'll make all the arrangements. They can stay with us at the time-share. There's plenty of room."

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“Perfect.”

They stood and shared a kiss over the table, then sat and began to eat.

“*You’re* perfect. You nailed every musical. I’m impressed. My music, too.”

“We have similar tastes, but I knew you’d also want CDs for your truck. I know you love your music. I also understand you have one hell of a voice and can sing like a dream. I can’t wait to hear you.”

“Be careful what you wish for. Though you wouldn’t know it from the time we’ve spent together so far, I’ve been known to sing everywhere and don’t really care who’s listening.” Not exactly the truth, but not a lie anymore either. She’d lost a precious gift thanks to Xavier. Zoe had been slowly rebuilding her voice and self-confidence. Frank didn’t need to hear all that. He probably knew it already.

“We’ll sell tickets. Put it in a college fund for our kids.”

Zoe snickered and bit into beef so tender it nearly melted in her mouth.

“There is one other thing you need to heal,” he said. “One thing you asked me for.”

Heat flushed her from head to toe. She could barely swallow the bite she’d taken. Now wasn’t the time for this. The afternoon filled with revelations she really didn’t want to hear had only resurrected ghosts Zoe thought were long buried.

“I did a little Internet research today. I’m not completely onboard with the concept of spanking. We really need to talk about—”

“No.” She set her fork down and clutched her folded hands on her lap to hide their shaking. “Oh, my God, please tell me you

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didn't run that past the neighborhood watch."

"Of course not. I—"

"No. Just no..." Zoe struggled for words while those old nightmares reared up in her head. "After hearing all this crap this afternoon, remembering that life, I can't believe I... It makes me sick inside to think I..."

Frank was by her side before she could blink and had her in his lap a second later, holding, caressing, cherishing... protecting.

"Shh, sweetheart. It's okay. Step at a time, step at a time." He hugged her tight. Soothing circles eased her upset. "Forgive me now if I forget and indulge in the occasional love pat."

Zoe giggled. "Oh... I like love pats. I would be my pleasure to receive them."

Frank nipped her earlobe. "And it would be my pleasure to give them."

Shivers wiggled through her. "You know what else would be my pleasure?"

His lips crawled up her throat. "What's that?"

"To finish this delicious meal, then take what's left of the wine, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and as many rose petals as we can carry up to your bedroom—"

"*Our* bedroom."

She smiled. "*Our* bedroom... and let me have my way with you."

His eyes sparkled. "Let's eat up."

"Somehow I suspected you'd agreed." Zoe gave him a kiss... and a love pat of her own.

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\* \* \*

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