

A man in a black t-shirt is shown from the chest up, facing left. The background is a warm, orange-hued sunset or sunrise. The text is overlaid on the man's shirt and the background.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

SUZANNE
BROCKMANN

AUTHOR OF HOT PURSUIT

BREAKING
THE
RULES

A TROUBLESHOOTERS/SEAL TEAM 16 NOVEL



SUZANNE
BROCKMANN

BREAKING
THE RULES

A NOVEL



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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-one

Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three

Chapter Twenty-four

Chapter Twenty-five

Chapter Twenty-six

Chapter Twenty-seven

Chapter Twenty-eight

Chapter Twenty-nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-one

Dedication

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Other Books by This Author](#)

[About the Author](#)

Excerpt from *Born to Darkness*

The Troubleshooters, Inc. Series

AFGHANISTAN

THURSDAY, 16 APRIL 2009

It happened so fast.

The IED—a car bomb, had to be—went off in the middle of the busy neighborhood. One minute Izzy Zanella was letting Mark Jenkins use him as a sounding board for the pros and cons of putting in an offer on a house before he and his wife, Lindsey, sold the condo—which was ridiculous, because Izzy had never owned property in his thirty years of life and wasn't likely to change from being a renter anytime soon. But that was probably why Jenk was bouncing his thoughts off Izzy—because said thoughts would, absolutely, bounce.

Of course, their Navy SEAL teammate and resident pain in the ass Danny-Danny-bo-ban Gillman had never owned property either, but he had an Opinion with a capital O on the subject—and that O stood for boring. Dan had spent most of the morning dourly warning Jenkie to not even *think* about buying anything in this craphell market—not until they had a buyer for the condo locked in.

Jenk, however, was in love—and not just with his adorable yet kick-ass wife. He was in love with his entire life, including Lindsey's whoopsie-daisy pregnancy. It had just happened or rather, they'd just found out about it. And even though they had nearly eight full months before Baby Day, Jenk really, *really* wanted to buy what was, without a doubt, his idea of the perfect house, particularly since it sat three perfect houses down from the equally perfect home of SEAL Team Sixteen's former CO, Tommy Paoletti, whom Markie-Mark still loved nearly as much as Lindsey and their fabulous life.

And Izzy had to admit that living down the street from Tommy, who had a more-than-merrier policy to his almost-weekly cookouts, would be pretty flipping great.

Jenkins didn't want to hear any more of Gillman's doom and gloom, which was why he was walking next to Izzy and saying, "If it turns out we can't sell the condo, we can always go to Plan B—"

Which was when the world went *boom*.

Izzy went from nodding his agreement to soul-kissing the street and inhaling rancid water from a puddle that was part yak piss, part toxic sludge.

He rolled over to do a quick head count of his teammates and encountered Dan Gillman who was doing the exact same thing, his hand on Izzy's leg—the better to shake him with.

"Zanella, Christ, are you all right?" Gillman asked, far more urgently than Izzy would have expected, considering that Izzy's main reason for finding Dan such a royal pain in the ass was the fact that Dan thought *Izzy* was the world's biggest load. And he'd come to his opinion about *that* long before Izzy had gone and married Danny's little sister, Eden, which had inarguably, made things even more awkward.

In the best of times, they were frenemies. In the worst, they gave in to their animosity, at which point one of their fists usually ended up in the other's face.

And it was usually Danny's fist and Izzy's face. Although they'd definitely vice versa'd it

time or two in the recent past.

Izzy had to spit out the yak piss before he could do more than nod, but then he remembered that it wasn't too long ago that Dan had had the unnerving experience of witnessing a Marine who'd been standing a few scant inches away from him get hit by shrapnel from a similar explosion.

The kid had bled out in a matter of minutes, despite Dan's frantic attempts at first aid.

"I'm fine," Izzy reassured him. Their SEAL teammates—Jenkins, Tony V., and Lopez—were all fine, too, thank God.

In fact, Lopez was so fine, he was already running toward the smoke and flames. Izzy scrambled to his feet and followed, with Jenk, Tony, and Gillman hot on his heels.

They'd been a mere four blocks away from the former marketplace that was the bomb ground zero, and as they approached, the chaos increased.

More than one bus was on its side. Other cars were flipped upside down, one of them burning.

Civilians were everywhere. Crying. Bleeding. Some of them were running away, some not doing much of anything but lying, dazed, where they'd fallen, slapped down by the blast's giant invisible hand.

The United States Marines, God bless 'em, were already on the scene, a female officer coolly and efficiently taking command of the rescue effort—getting the injured people out of the vehicles, evacuating the surrounding buildings, putting out the fires.

Izzy's ears were still ringing, but he saw what Lopez was doing with the hot Marine lieutenant's blessing. He was creating a first-aid station for the injured, right there on the sidewalk.

Sirens were wailing in the distance, emergency vehicles coming from every direction. But the streets were filled not just with people but with rubble and smoke, and holy shit, the front of an entire row of buildings, including his favorite shawarma stand, had been blown to hell. And the crater from the bomb had made the street here beyond the marketplace impassable every way but from the north.

Help was coming, but it wasn't going to arrive soon enough.

But Lopez was a hospital corpsman—the Navy equivalent of an Army medic—and he was focused on saving the lives that he could. Normally soft-spoken, he was using his outdoor voice to inform any other medical personnel on the scene about his makeshift triage area.

It was then, as Izzy was pointing out Lopez to an ancient woman who was half carrying her bloody and dazed nearly-elderly-himself son, that he noticed Mark Jenkins was looking a little pale. The height-challenged SEAL was holding his right wrist tight against his side, as if he'd jammed it bad when he'd forcefully come into close personal contact with the street.

"Y'okay?" Izzy stepped closer to ask, exactly as Dan, too, came over and inquired. "Jenkins, are you hurt?"

Jenk shook his head in a mix of both yes and no. "Help me find a piece of wood for a splint."

"Shit," Izzy said as he helped Danny sift through the rubble of what used to be the restaurant. "Is it broken?"

The owner had survived, thank God, but he was sitting now among the debris, stunned. "Hang on, Mr. Wahidi," Izzy called to the man. "I'll be right over to help you."

Everything was either too big or too splintered or too full of nasty-ass nails.

“A brace,” Jenkins corrected himself as he bent to pick up a piece of what had once been a sign for tea. “I meant a brace. Son of a *bitch*.”

His wrist was definitely broken.

He turned another more greenish shade of pale, his golly-gee freckles standing out on his nose, because he’d jarred his arm trying to measure it against that piece of wood.

“Maybe you should sit down, bro,” Gillman suggested, which was stupid. No way was Jenkins going to sit down and surrender to a relatively mild injury when there were so many more severely wounded people to assist.

Of course, maybe Dan only meant it, like, *Maybe you should sit down for a sec, bro, because it is going to hurt like a screaming bitch when we belt your arm to that splint.*

But any mention of giving in to the pain would have pissed Izzy off royally were he not for Jenk’s tiny boots, so he took charge. “He’s fine where he is,” he told Dan, told Jenkins, told everyone else because the man looked like he needed encouragement, and adding to Dan, “Don’t bother with your belt.”

Izzy found his spare bungee cords in his vest pocket and pulled out a couple. Those little suckers were useful, even when the SEALs weren’t up in the mountains. They would work better than a belt to keep Jenk’s broken arm supported by that piece of wood.

The wood, however, left much to be desired. So Izzy tossed Dan the cords, reaching down and untying his own bootlaces, even as he told Jenk, “I say go for it. Buy the house of your dreams.”

As he’d expected, Danny objected, which was good. Jenk needed a little distraction. “Are you holding two mortgages if the condo doesn’t sell?” Dan said.

“Sure, why not?” Izzy quickly stripped off his sock. It was a little soggy and extremely aromatic, but it would do the trick.

Dan was sputtering. “Because ... it’s insane?” But he saw what Izzy was doing and held out his hand for the sock and covered the piece of wood’s ragged end with it, even as Izzy jammed his bare foot back into his boot.

“No, it’s not,” Izzy told Jenkins as he took the sock-covered wood from Dan and tested it against his own hand. Not great, but much better. Uncovered, that slice of raw wood would’ve scraped the shit out of Jenkie’s palm. His sock gave it at least a little bit of padding and protection. “Because if you don’t sell it, you can rent it. That’s a great Plan B, man, brother. You know, my lease is up in a month. I could be your tenant.”

Jenk and Lindsey’s condo was much nicer than his current place—which stupidly still reeked of memories of Izzy’s too-short marriage to Eden. Although how that could be, Izzy didn’t understand. He’d been married to her for ... what? A week? Damn, he’d only made love to her once—but it had been in his bed, in his bedroom, in his stupid, stupid apartment on their wedding night.

It had been an event of momentous importance that Izzy still dreamed about—both feverishly at night and in unguarded moments during the daytime, when his thoughts wandered off to a fantasyland where wishes came true.

Not only was Eden uncommonly beautiful with her big brown eyes and lustrously dark hair, her flawless smooth skin, heart-shaped face, that sensual mouth that was quick to smile. But she also got Izzy’s jokes. She spoke his language. She was funny and smart and

courageous, and yes, a little bit crazy. Reckless. Unafraid to dance to a different drummer.

All that, plus a body that didn't quit ...?

Back when they'd first met, Izzy'd fallen in lust with her at first sight, and solidly in love within the first five minutes they'd talked. But she didn't stay in San Diego for long. She left almost immediately, to visit her Army sergeant father in Germany.

But then, six months later, when Eden had resurfaced back in the States, she'd been six months pregnant and in dire need of a knight in shining armor. So Izzy'd married her, even though there was no way on earth that baby she'd been carrying could have possibly been his.

But he didn't care. He just wanted to be her hero.

And to get into her pants. Which he'd done after marrying her.

But then she'd miscarried, lost the baby, and run back to Germany. And spent the past ten months refusing to see him.

Even though he'd gone all the way to Europe to try to see her, more times than he could count.

"Jenkins has a two-bedroom," Dan pointed out. "What are you going to do, get a roommate?"

"Ooh, Dan," Izzy said. "Great idea. We could finally live together." He held the splint out so that Jenkins could put his wrist against it. This was the part that was going to hurt, but Jenk nodded for them to do it, just get it over with. He closed his eyes.

But it was Danny who made the choking, gagging sounds as they got Jenk as patched up as he was going to be—at least until he returned to the base and saw a doctor.

But Izzy couldn't resist pushing it, even though the last thing he wanted was Danny freaking Gillman for a roommate. "Seriously, Dan, if we split the rent it would be pretty cheap. You're not going to keep bunking in the enlisted quarters, are you, now that you and Jenn are tight? What are you going to do when she comes to San Diego to visit? It's time you moved into big-boy housing."

"Go fuck yourself," Dan said, genuinely pissed. Apparently Izzy had trod on a hot button. Interesting. Was it the mention of Jennilyn visiting or just the mention of Jennilyn?

"I've found that I'm a little shy," Izzy said, "for such blatantly public displays of self-affection. Besides, I like to be wined and dined before I have my way with myself. I'm an old-fashioned kind of guy."

"Old-fashioned," Dan scoffed. "Is that the excuse you use to convince yourself that you're not a shithead? *I'm old-fashioned, because back in the eighteen hundreds men regularly took children as their brides ...*"

She wasn't a child, Izzy stopped himself from saying, because he was *not* going to talk about Eden anymore. Not with anyone—and especially not her asshole brother. That part of his life was over and done. In fact, as soon as he got back to San Diego, he was going to ask the senior chief for some help in finding a divorce lawyer.

But Dan was into tit-for-tatting, and since Izzy had stumbled onto one of his hot buttons, the dude now felt compelled to jump with both feet onto Izzy's.

In the past, Izzy would have risen to the bait and their conversation would've gone a little like this:

Dan: *At the end of the day, you're the one who was banging a seventeen-year-old.*

Izzy: *She was eighteen. And I didn't bang her.*

Dan: *Oh, excuse me. You made beautiful, tender love to her. That's right, I always forget. It was the four hundred and seventeen guys that came before you that she banged.*

Izzy: *Don't you say that shit about her—*

Dan: *She used you, man. She uses everyone. Why don't you just face the truth and move on?*

Izzy: (throwing a punch) *Why don't you go fuck yourself ...?*

“Y’okay?” Izzy asked Jenk instead as the other SEAL experimented with the splint, cautiously moving his arm. Dan was watching closely, too.

And this time when Jenk nodded, it was a solid yes.

At that, both Izzy and Dan turned in a unison that couldn't have been more precise had it been choreographed, and they went in separate directions—Dan toward Lopez, and Izzy toward Tony V.

It was clear that they didn't need a debate or a discussion to agree they'd already spent far too freaking much time together today.

Although the good news was that neither of them was walking away with a bloody nose.

Of course, there was still a lot of daylight left.

NEW YORK CITY

THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 2009

Jennilyn LeMay was having a day.

It had started when she got to work and realized that she'd gotten the mother of all runs on her pantyhose, and that she didn't have a spare pair in her desk drawer.

She'd only had time for the quickest trip to the drugstore on the next block over, but that proved ineffective. Unbelievably, they were completely out of queen-size in every color and every conceivable brand, as if the place had been descended upon by a drove of bargain-hunting opera singers. Best Jenn could find, way in the back behind the tube socks, was a pair of thick white tights that were labeled both queen-size *and* petite—clearly designed for two hundred-pound height-challenged nurses, rather than giantesses like Jenn who weren't quite six feet tall if they both lied and slouched.

No doubt about it, as far as her hopes went for—quite literally—covering her ass, the fat lady was singing.

While wearing seventy pairs of pantyhose.

The store clerk helpfully went to the same rack that Jenn had already searched before, informing her that they still had plenty of size large—maybe that would work. She then turned and looked at Jenn, squinting slightly as she appraised her, adding, “Probably not.”

And yes, lady. You got it. There was no way in hell that Jenn was going to be able to squeeze herself into plain old regular large. And thanks a billion for the pre-coffee esteem-boosting bludgeoning judgment.

Sticking out her tongue and announcing, “My super-hot Navy SEAL boyfriend likes me just the way I am,” seemed a little childish. Especially since she'd been cautious about referring

Dan Gillman as her boyfriend to her friends and family—let alone acquaintances.

It wasn't that he didn't fit the definition. He sent her an e-mail every day, when he could. Usually it was brief—*Too tired to say more than hey ...* was a common one, along with *Thanks for the package*, and *Dreamed about you again last night, wild woman ...* But sometimes he wrote her long, intimate e-mails about his highly dysfunctional family, about adventures he'd had growing up, about his plans for the future, about the unjust oppression of women that he witnessed every day, about a myriad of things that mattered to him.

And she e-mailed him back, also every day. She sent packages to him, too, sometimes as often as twice a week.

And yes, the first and only time they'd met they'd shared some ridiculously excellent sex along with a whole lot of intimate pillow talk. That, too, worked with the standard boyfriend/girlfriend definition.

But when Dan had suddenly gotten all *I love you*, after helping to save Jenn's life, well ...

She'd needed to be certain that it wasn't just a heady mix of adrenaline and hormones talking, because she knew that she wasn't his usual type. So she'd sent him away, telling him that if he were serious about their relationship he could prove it by coming back.

Of course, days later he'd called to tell her that he was heading overseas, into one of the war zones. He couldn't tell her where and he couldn't tell her when he'd be back, but she knew from what he didn't say that he was going to Afghanistan.

There was no time for her to fly to California, to see him off. He was leaving immediately.

Jenn had cried for a week, torn between knowing that she'd done the right thing, and regretting that she'd wasted the little time they might've spent together.

But that still didn't make Dan her boyfriend.

So she said nothing to the store clerk. She just left, hoseless.

There was another drugstore a mere three blocks away, but Jenn had no time to go there. She had a conference call that she had to take at 9:15, and another at 10, so she'd hidden her bare, winter-pale legs beneath her desk and hoped she wouldn't be required to leave the office before her day ended at 8 p.m.

It wasn't an unrealistic hope. As New York State Assemblywoman Maria Bonavita's chief of staff, Jenn spent most of her time in their New York City office using phone, e-mail, and fax to put out the little fires that sprang up in the course of a day.

But unfortunately today's fire wasn't little, and it required a face-to-face with some rightfully frustrated and angry constituents. And since Maria was in Albany, Jenn's had to be the face they put out there. Because although her title was chief of staff, she was also Maria's *entire* staff, not counting the unpaid college interns. There was no one else to send.

So Jenn took her larger-than-large unhosiered legs, and her bespectacled face that Dan claimed was "cute" despite her Amazonian size, and headed for the boarded-up building that had served as a homeless shelter for veterans before the grease fire in the restaurant next door had done its damage.

It had happened months earlier, in the coldest part of the winter—which had been devastating for the men who filled the shelter to capacity every night.

But there were problems with the insurance payout, as well as safety issues, that kept the place locked up tight. The shelter's organizers, led by a Vietnam veteran named Jack Ventano, had come to Maria's office for help after weeks of runaround.

She was trying to get them the assistance they needed to get their facility up and running again. But it wasn't happening fast enough. And now Jack had called, demanding that Maria come take a tour of the place, to see firsthand the mold that was starting to grow on the water-damaged walls.

Jenn had just gone into a CVS that was halfway to the shelter, and was searching the overhead signs for the hosiery aisle when her cell phone rang.

It was Mick Callahan, a detective with the NYPD, and a friend of Jenn's.

She answered as she continued to scan and finally just made a choice to go down the narrow aisle to the back of the store. "Hello?"

"Maria needs to get her ass down to the Vet Center," Mick said in his gravelly, native New Yorker's voice, without proper greeting or ceremony. "ASAP."

"She's upstate, but I'm already on my way," Jenn told him.

"Hail a cab," he told her. "And Mary, while you're at it. You're definitely gonna need divine intervention for this one."

She stopped, directly in front of a display of L'eggs. They had both her size and the color she'd hoped to find. Alleluia. "What's going on?"

"About seven of the vets have broken the lock on the door," Mick told her grimly as she grabbed a pair and headed for the checkout, up front. "They've gone inside, with several crates of supplies. I think they're going to lock themselves in until they get some action. We've been ordered to get them out, forcibly if necessary, but I've convinced the lieutenant to give you a chance to get down here and defuse the situation, but the clock's ticking. Jenn, seriously, you need to be here. Now."

"I'm on my way." There were seven people on line and one slow-moving, half-asleep cashier, so Jenn sighed and put the pantyhose in a clearly designated dump basket near the exit before going out to the street and hailing a cab.

LAS VEGAS

Eden Gillman Zanella stood in the shadows of the shallow wing, just offstage, and tried to calm her pounding heart.

This was no big deal.

She just had to walk out there and do this exactly the way she'd practiced. If she got the job, she'd be bringing home somewhere in the neighborhood of two hundred dollars a night in tips.

And even though working at the Burger King for minimum wage was more dignified, it would take her months to earn the same kind of money that she could make here in a week.

Dignity was overrated, anyway.

And the female body was just that—the female body. Yes, she'd be the first to agree that hers was exceptionally nice-looking. She couldn't take any credit for that—it was an accident of birth.

True, she'd worked it, hard, to get back to her pre-pregnancy weight, even in the aftermath of losing her baby. And she'd had to get a tattoo to hide the scar from the C-section that had saved her life.

But she'd had a beautiful mother and a drop-dead handsome father, which didn't

necessarily mean Eden had to be exceptionally beautiful. But luck had been on her side, and she was.

She had a classically beautiful face, with even features, big brown eyes and long, dark lashes. Her skin was smooth and clear, and she had thick, dark, shiny hair that fell halfway down her back.

Of course, while a pretty face and great hair were valuable assets, they weren't as important as the body she'd won in the genetics lottery. Tits and ass. It always came down to that bottom line, at least for men. And hers were world class—they had been ever since puberty hit.

And after years of getting leered at wherever she went, she was now on the verge of getting *paid* for the very same thing.

Mostly the same thing.

The song that had been playing—some generic 1970s disco—finally faded out and there was a smattering of applause from the crowd of losers and lowlifes who were out there getting wasted on a Thursday morning at eight o'clock.

The woman—billed as Chestee von Schnaps—who'd been on that stage came stomping on in disgust. "Four fucking dollars," she said, to no one in particular. "The morning shift is bullshit." She stopped to put a finger practically up Eden's nose, oblivious to the fact that she was still mostly naked, with breasts that were nearly the size of basketballs. "You—new girl! Make sure that cocksucker Alan gives you breakfast. You work this bullshit shift, you make sure you at least get fed, you hear me?"

Were those things real?

"You hear me?" the woman repeated, and Eden nodded, even though Alan hadn't said anything about meals. This was not a woman with whom anyone would dare to disagree.

"I'm Nic. What's your stage name?" she asked, appraising Eden.

Her stage name. Instead of admitting that she didn't have one yet, Eden blurted out the first thing that came into her head. "Jennilyn LeMay." It was her brother Danny's new girlfriend's name, and right from the first moment she'd heard it—in an e-mail from her other brother Ben—Eden had thought it sounded like a stripper name.

The large-breasted woman seemed satisfied with that information, because she nodded and stomped away.

And okay. Now Eden was in a panic, because the CD that she'd given the DJ had started which was her cue to take the stage.

She'd always thought she was well endowed, but compared to the twin basketballs ... How crap. This audience was going to look at her and laugh.

"Go!" someone whispered as they put two strong hands on her back and pushed her out from behind the curtain.

Where, oh sweet Lord, she froze.

She'd thought, with the lights, that she wouldn't be able to see the audience, but they were lit, too. And she realized that Alan, the manager who was considering hiring her, had told her as much. *It's the eye contact that'll get you the biggest tips*, he'd told her, when offering her pointers.

"Dance," someone shouted, because she was just standing there, gaping at them, as her lips all but flashed before her eyes.

All the crap she'd been through, all the garbage, all the pain. And Izzy, who'd married her when she was pregnant, even though he wasn't the father of her child ... *Don't think about Pinkie, don't think about Izzy ...*

But she couldn't help thinking about them both—the baby and the lover that she'd lost. What would either of them think to see her here, now? But Pinkie was dead, and Izzy was gone.

Eden could see Alan in the back, in the DJ's booth, shaking his head in disgust.

"Get off the stage," someone else yelled.

She was blowing this. She needed this money. And it really was no big deal. She'd been putting on shows for men ever since she'd realized that if she washed her face and wore one of those silly dresses that her grandmother bought for her, her chances of being bought an ice cream rose exponentially. What was she, three, when she'd learned that? This was just a variation on that exact same theme.

She could see a man in the audience who could've been the brother of Mr. Henderson, her high school chemistry teacher, who'd let her know that a visit to him at home could significantly raise her grade for the semester. And there, at another table, was a man who had the same sleaze and smarm level as Mr. Leavitt, the sanctimonious father of one of her many high school boyfriends. He'd disapproved of his son dating her, but had turned around and propositioned her one night when he'd "accidentally" bumped into her at the video store where he damn well knew that she worked.

And, there. Over there was a look-alike for John Franklin, who, at nearly four years her senior, had pledged his undying love before taking her virginity in the back of his car when she was only fourteen. He'd immediately dumped her—laughing because she'd been stupid enough to believe him.

This place was crawling with predators, with men who wanted a piece of her—and not the part that held her brain. But they weren't just in here, they were outside as well, scattered across and around and all over the world.

And she would have to put up with their unwanted attention and inappropriate comments while she worked for slave wages at BK or Micky D's, or even just walked down the street.

Or she could get rich off of them, working here, taking advantage of the fact that she had the ultimate power. She had what they wanted, and they could look, but they could not touch. Not unless they wanted to slip a five- or, no, a *ten*-dollar bill into the elastic strap of the red satin thong she'd bought just yesterday, as an investment for her and Ben's future. And even then, they had to watch their hands because the bouncers would kick their asses off of there if they even so much as copped a feel. No, if she so much as *claimed* they'd copped a feel.

She had the power. And she liked having it. She always had. She'd just had to learn not to trade too much for the proverbial ice cream—and never, ever confuse need and lust with real love.

She'd tried real love once—or she thought she had, and that had ended horribly. *Don't think about Izzy, don't think about Izzy ...*

Money—she had to think about the money. She needed money—lots of money—and she needed it fast, in order to get Ben out of their stepfather's odious grasp. And here, at D'Amato's, with the stage and the lights and the men in the audience with the hungry eyes

she had the power to get it.

Eden forced herself to breathe and to not think about Izzy, or Pinkie, or even her little brother Ben as she walked to the front edge of the stage and called to the DJ. “I’m sorry Vaughn, will you start that again?”

The DJ—a big black man—glanced at Alan, the manager, who was still shaking his head.

So Eden spoke directly to the predators who’d come there to see women get naked. “I’m a little shy,” she told them, looking from one to the next, to the next, to the next, and on and on, around the room—eye contact. She was good at that. She made her voice a mix of sweet young-thing and girl-gone-wild. She was good at that, too. “This is my first time. You guys want to be here for my *very* first time, don’t you? Will you help me out and ask Vaughn to start the music over?”

And now they were shouting at Vaughn, but they didn’t need to, because Alan was already on board, looking at her and smiling. He gave Vaughn a nod.

And this time? When the music began?

Eden danced.

And when she left the stage, it was with a hundred and seventy dollars in tips—ten-dollar bills only.

Not bad for a bullshit morning crowd.

And needless to say, she got the job.

AFGHANISTAN

THURSDAY, 16 APRIL 2009

Dan was helping a pair of very young and very female Marine privates get the wounded off the toppled bus. One of them was inside, pushing a frightened woman and her wailing two-year-old out of the window and into the other marine's arms.

That second private—blond and cute in a Heidi of Wisconsin way—handed the child to Dan, who was on the ground. She then scrambled down herself to help with the woman who was no lightweight.

The civilian was bleeding from a gash on her forehead, but she seemed more concerned with keeping her headscarf on. Her little boy was terrified, though, sobbing as he stood waiting for her, his arms outstretched.

"Your mommy's going to be all right," Dan told him, trying various dialects, but the boy didn't stop crying even when his mother clasped him tightly in her arms.

"You should see the medic about your head," the blond marine tried to tell the woman, pointing over to where Lopez had set up his triage, where the first ambulance had finally arrived, bringing medical supplies. But it was clear she didn't speak English. The marine—the name S. Anderson was on her jacket—looked at Dan. "I'm sorry, sir, can you tell her—"

"I'm not an officer," Dan told her, then used his rudimentary language skills to point to Lopez and say *doctor*.

The woman nodded and thanked them both profusely, her boy's head tucked beneath her chin.

"But you're a SEAL," S. Anderson said as she scrambled back onto the bus. "There should be some form of address for SEALs that trumps sir. Maybe *Your Highness* or *Oh, Great One*?"

She was flirting with him, marine-style, which meant she was already getting back to work.

And Dan wasn't quite sure what to say. *I have a girlfriend that I really love* seemed weird and presumptuous. After all, if S. Anderson had been a man, he might've said the same thing, and Dan would've laughed and replied, "*Great One* sounds about right."

Except S. Anderson's smile was loaded with more than respect and admiration. There was a little *Why don't you find me later so you can do me* mixed in there, too. And Dan didn't think he was merely imagining it.

The sure-thing factor was flattering, as it always was, and the old pattern that he'd run for years kicked in, and he found himself assessing her. Her uniform covered her completely, but it didn't take much imagination to see that although she was trim and not particularly curvaceous, she was curvy enough. She was cute, freckled and petite and—Jesus, what was he doing?

But then there was no time to bitch-slap or otherwise chastise himself, because a gunman opened fire.

The first shot took down the Marine officer who was running the rescue effort, and the cry rang out, repeated by all of the military personnel in the area. Dan shouted it, too: "*Sniper!*"

Jesus, the civilian woman and her child were in the middle of the open marketplace completely exposed.

S. Anderson saw them, too, and instead of diving for cover inside of the bus, she jumped back down to help him help them. Dan could hear her, just a few steps behind him as he ran toward the woman, shouting, "Run!"

But the woman had heard the shots, and she'd crouched down to shield her child, uncertain of which way to escape.

Because there was no cover anywhere near, and nowhere to run except ...

"Go!" Danny shouted, thrusting the child into S. Anderson's arms, pointing to the blast crater. If they could get to the edge of that gaping hole in the road, and slide down to the bottom and then hug the rubble and earth ...

The woman shrieked as her child was ripped from her, but his plan was a good one because she immediately followed, no explanation needed.

He tried to shield her with his body, tried to get her to run a zigzag path that was similar to the one Anderson was taking with the little boy. But the woman's mission to reach and protect her child was so single-minded, it was like trying to push a freight train from its tracks.

From the corner of his eye, as he ran at the woman's top speed, Dan saw Lopez and Izzy pulling the fallen officer to cover onto the patio of what, in happier times, had been a hotel.

But then Dan saw Izzy turn to look out at him in disbelief. He heard the other SEAL shout his name, and Dan realized that the slap he'd just felt in the back of his thigh had been a bullet.

And Jesus Christ, that was his blood exploding out through the front of his pants from the exit wound. And sure enough, his leg crumpled beneath his weight with the next stride he took. But they were close enough to the crater for him to push the woman the last few feet down into Anderson's waiting arms.

But Dan was still six feet away, with a leg that not only didn't work but, holy shit, was really starting to hurt. He had to crawl, pulling himself forward, his hands raw on the rough debris in the street, because he was *not* going to do this to Jennilyn. He was *not* going to come home in a coffin.

But he saw all the blood, and he knew he was dead. There was no way he was going to survive, even if he made it to cover. The motherfucker with the rifle had hit an artery. Dan was going to bleed out before that sniper was taken down, and there was nothing anyone could do to save him.

But he didn't quit because he didn't know how to quit. And then he didn't have to quit because something hit him hard in the side, and he realized with a burst of pain that it was Izzy, singing at the top of his lungs, "Oh, the weather outside is frightful ..."

The freaking idiot had run all the way across that open patch of gravel and debris. He dived, as if sliding into home, right on top of Dan, and they'd tumbled together down into the blast crater.

But it was too late.

And wasn't this just the way it would happen? The last face Dan would see, the last person he would speak to before leaving this earth ...

Was Izzy fucking Zanella.

The SEAL had stopped singing—thank you, God—and his face was grim as he rolled Dan onto his back; he ripped another of his stupid bungee cords from his vest pocket and used it as a tourniquet around Dan’s upper thigh—as if that would help.

“What can I do?” Anderson asked as, in the background, the little boy continued to wail.

Izzy glanced at her. “Apply pressure at his groin. Help me slow the bleeding.”

“Zanella ...” Danny tried to get his attention, finally grabbing the front of his vest. “Zanella—”

“Hang in there, buddy,” Izzy said, using his knife to tear Dan’s pants to get a better look at his wound. “You’re going to be okay.” But Anderson blanched, in contrast to Izzy’s reassurances. “We’re going to get you to the hospital—”

“No, you’re not,” Dan said. No one was going anywhere with that shooter out there. Dan could hear the report of his rifle, again and again. “Zanella, you gotta tell Jenni for me—”

“No, no, no,” Izzy said, interrupting him. “You’re gonna tell her whatever you want to tell her yourself, bro. That sniper is toast. We’ve got the fucking United States Marines on our side. Am I right or am I right, Anderson?”

“Sir, yes, sir,” she said.

“They’re gonna take him out—”

“Not soon enough,” Dan interrupted. He could feel himself getting cold. Ah, God, Jenni ... He reached to grab Anderson’s arm, because he had to make sure Jenni knew, and Izzy wasn’t listening. “She didn’t believe me,” he told the woman. “Jenni didn’t. And I need her to know—”

“Gillman,” Izzy said sharply. “Listen to me. You fucking stop bleeding, do you hear me? You can do this. Use your brain for something other than being an asshole. Lower your heart rate and tell yourself to keep your blood away from this leg.”

“Zanella—”

“Do it, goddamn it.” Izzy turned to Anderson. “Keep applying pressure, Private. I’ll be right back.”

Izzy launched himself up and out of the blast crater, keeping his head down in a crouch as he ran back toward Lopez and the medical supplies.

He could hear the ping of the bullets, see the geysers of dust they kicked up as the sniper tried for him and missed.

And missed.

And missed again, suckwad motherfucker! Hah!

He slid into the cover provided by the ornate wooden deck of what once had been a fancy hotel restaurant, where patrons could dine on two levels. There’d probably been a tent to protect the upper level from the sun as the good folks of this town had had their business lunches.

Back during the time when the people of Afghanistan had both businesses and lunches.

But right now the wooden deck made it possible for the wounded to be cared for without risking death or injury to their caregivers.

One of whom was Lopez, who helped him to his feet. “Holy Jesus, Son of God,” he said in Spanish as he saw the blood on Izzy’s uniform.

Lopez was covered with blood himself, from trying to save the marine officer’s life. Trying and failing, which sucked royal ass.

“It’s bad,” Izzy confirmed, telling Lopez what he didn’t want to hear, yet already knew. “Dan needs surgery. Now. Bullet nicked his femoral artery.”

“Fuck.” It was not a word that Lopez used often, in English or in Spanish, but it fit the situation.

“I need a clamp,” Izzy told him as he was already moving toward the medical supplies “and some morphine and some bags of blood—he’s O—and IV tubing. A needle—you know all that shit.”

Lopez was shaking his head, even as he rummaged through his equipment. “We don’t have blood yet,” he said as he gathered up everything else, scooping it into a bag for easy transport. “Or even any plasma extender. But if I can—”

“You’re not going out there,” Izzy told his friend.

“Yeah,” Lopez said. “I am. I’ll use the clamp—”

“Not good enough. *I’ll* use the clamp.” Izzy took the bag from him. “Danny needs blood, Jay, and I’m O, you’re not. Give me the tubing—and two needles.”

Lopez silently—but swiftly, bless him—added what Izzy needed to the bag.

And Izzy dashed back out into the sniper’s kill zone.

Luckily for him, the dickweed was a relatively crappy shot.

NEW YORK CITY

THURSDAY, APRIL 16, 2009

“This isn’t the way to do this, Jack.” Jenn stood her ground even as the big man took a step forward, on the verge of invading her personal space with the crutches he’d needed to get around since 1968. She held his gaze, too, refusing to let it waver, not even to glance behind him at the small crowd of other intimidating-looking men who’d gathered grimly to support him. Some of them had pulled back their jackets when she’d first arrived, to let her know that they were armed. And wasn’t *that* just great? “You know that the assemblywoman—”

Jack Ventano interrupted her. “Isn’t getting this done.”

“It takes time,” Jenn told him. “There are laws—”

“There should be laws,” he agreed, “insisting that the men and women who serve our country get the care and the support that they need, instead of—”

“You *know* we’re on your side.”

“That’s not enough, and *you* know that.”

Jenn was silent then, because he was right.

The big man pushed his gray hair back from his face, revealing the edge of the long, rough scar he bore on his forehead. He’d gotten that in ’Nam, at Khe San, he’d told her once, when she and Maria had taken a tour of the shelter, back when Maria was running for office. He’d lost most of his leg in the same battle. But worst of all, he’d lost his best friend, a man named Tom Terwilliger—which was why this shelter bore Terwilliger’s name.

Lost. What a funny euphemism for it. As if Tom and Jack’s leg had both been accidentally misplaced.

“Maybe, this way, we’ll finally get news coverage,” Jack told her now.

“Maybe,” she pointed out, “you will. Fat lot of good that’ll do you, serving time upstate, in jail.”

“Won’t be the first time I have a temporary vacation in Ossining,” he said with a smile that softened his harsh, weather-beaten features. “And if it helps this place get rebuilt ...” He shrugged. “I can do the time standing on one hand.”

“As soon as I walk out that door,” Jenn warned him, “the police are coming in. If you or anyone with you kills a cop ... Your trip upstate won’t be temporary. And this place will never open again.”

“No one’s going to kill anybody,” Jack reassured her.

“You can’t promise that,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said, and the expression on his face was almost apologetic. “I sort of can. The police aren’t coming in, because ... you’re not going anywhere.”

Jenn laughed, but then stopped as the men behind Jack moved between her and the door. This was just perfect. “So what am I?” she asked. “Your hostage? For the love of God, Jack. We’re *friends*. Friends don’t hold friends hostage.”

“*Hostage* is such an ugly word,” he said. “But yeah. If that’s how we have to do it.” He shrugged again. “We were kind of hoping it would be Maria. Thought it might give her a positive bump in the polls. A win/win ...”

“No,” Jenn said. “Nope. No, Jack—” Her cell phone rang. “Think about what you’re on the verge of doing. If you keep me here against my will? That’s a felony.” She checked her screen—it was Maria. “This is the assemblywoman,” she told him, holding up her phone. “I’m going to take her call, and when I’m done? We’re all going to walk out of here together. We’re going to go get some coffee, and we’re going to figure out a way to get you news coverage without a crime and a victim and a trial and a jail sentence.” She looked around at her buddies. “*Jail sentences*—plural, gentlemen.”

They seemed uneasy at that, looking to Jack for confirmation.

She turned away from them as she opened her phone and put it to her ear. “Maria?”

“Jenn.” Maria had on her pure-business voice. Terse and to the point. “Where are you?”

“I’m over at the shelter, with Jack and some of his guys,” Jenn reported. “We’re just about to go to Starbucks.” She glanced over at where Jack was now being questioned by his men and raised her voice a little. “My treat.”

He shook his head but two of his buddies seemed to like the idea. Jenn let them work on Jack as she focused her attention on Maria. “Where are *you*?” she asked her boss and longtime friend. “Because we could use you down here. These guys need a solution and—”

“I’m still in Albany,” Maria cut her off. “Jenn, you need to go into the ladies’ room or somewhere private. Immediately.”

“That’s ... not possible right now,” Jenn said. The facilities had been over near the kitchen where the blaze had done the worst of its damage. “I’m kind of in a meeting with Jack. We’re actually inside the shelter.”

“Pass him the phone,” Maria ordered.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Jenn lowered her voice to say. “Whatever you’ve heard, I’ve got the situation mostly under control.” Or she would have, if she could continue to appeal to Jack’s honor, his down-to-earth sanity, and his strong sense of right and wrong. Friends *didn’t* hold friends hostage, and he knew it.

“Damn it, Jennilyn,” Maria said in a rare burst of temper. “Pass. Jack. The phone.”

“Jeez.” Jenn turned back to Jack, holding her cell phone out for him. “The assemblywoman

apparently wants to talk to you quite badly.”

He took it. “This is Jack Ventano.” He was silent then, just listening, frowning in response to whatever Maria was telling him, glancing over at Jenn and then away, down at the floor. He finally spoke. “She’s going to want more information.” He paused again, listening, then said, “Okay. Yeah, I’ll ... Yeah. No, it’s bad timing, but when is it ever good timing for ... Yeah, ma’am, we’ll get her there. I’ll have her call you back in just a few.”

He hung up the phone, handing it back to Jenn, even as he turned to his posse. “Let’s get those boxes out of here. We’re standing down and moving it out. We’ll fight this fight another day.”

There was grumbling among some of his men, but the two who’d wanted Starbucks leaped to gather up their supplies.

Jack gestured toward the door as he told Jenn, “Let’s go.”

She hesitated for only a second or two before she followed him. “What did Maria promise you?”

“Nothing,” he told her as he led the way out the door.

There was only one police car out there. But on second glance, Jenn realized that Mick Callahan’s unmarked car was also double-parked in the street. He was leaning against it, and as he saw her and Jack emerge from the former shelter, he pushed himself up and came to meet them.

Jack, meanwhile, was giving orders to his guys. “Take the stuff back to my place. I’ll meet you over there in about an hour.”

Now Jenn was really confused. “I thought we were all going for coffee.”

Mick didn’t greet her. He just nodded to Jack, talking over her—which was hard to do because she was so tall. “I got it from here.”

But Jack shook his head. “I’m coming, too. She’ll have questions that I can maybe answer.”

Mick, always such a hardnose with something of an oppositional personality, was actually nodding in agreement as he reached to open the back door of his car. He put his hand on Jenn’s shoulder as if to usher her in, but she stopped.

“Guys. What’s going on?” She turned to Jack. “Whatever Maria has planned, she didn’t share it with me. Where are we going?”

“Jennilyn,” Mick answered for Jack, “just get in. Then you can call Maria back and she’ll explain.”

“Honey, she wants you to be sitting down,” Jack said, his brown eyes warm with concern and compassion. “So go ahead and sit, and I’ll tell you.”

And just like that, the world lurched, and Jenn knew with a horrible certainty that something terrible had happened. She lowered herself into the backseat of the car, looking from Jack to Mick and back, as God, Jack nodded and said the words she dreaded.

“It’s about Dan Gillman.”

“Oh God,” Jenn heard herself say as all of the air left her lungs. “Oh no. Oh, please don’t tell me—”

“He’s been badly wounded,” Jack said, which wasn’t as awful as the words she’d thought he was going to say.

“Wounded,” she repeated. Badly, he’d said. “How badly?” She fought the urge both to cry and to throw up. Neither would help her—or, more important, help Dan.

“Maria didn’t know,” Jack said, handing his crutches to Mick as he pushed her over on the bench backseat so he could sit beside her and take her hand. “But she told me he’s a SEAL and honey, SEALs are fighters.”

Jenn nodded. Dan. SEAL. Fighter. Yes. Oh God. “Where is he?”

“Maria didn’t know much,” Jack said as Mick put his crutches in the front seat and climbed behind the wheel, signaling and pulling out into the traffic. “I guess she’s got a friend whose husband is a chief in Dan’s team ...? She was the one who called Maria.”

Jenn nodded again. “Savannah,” she said. Savannah was Jenn’s friend, too. It was her connection to SEAL Team Sixteen that had brought Danny into her life. Please, dear God, let him be all right ...

“Maria’s trying to get more information,” Jack told her. “In the meantime, she figured you’d want to go home and maybe pack a bag, so you’d be ready to go, in case they send him somewhere a little friendlier than where we think he is right now.”

Jenn nodded again and dialed her cell phone, calling Maria back, praying that from here on out, the news she received would only be good. “He’s a fighter.” She repeated Jack’s words back to him just before Maria picked up her phone.

“Jenn,” she said. “Are you sitting—”

“I already know,” Jenn cut her off. “Jack told me. Danny’s hurt. Please, just tell me what else you know.”

“They’re flying him to Germany,” Maria told her. “Savannah’s finding out where. She’ll call you. She wants to buy a plane ticket so you can ... But I don’t think that’s a good idea. Not yet. Not until ...”

“What aren’t you telling me?” Jenn asked.

“Jenni, he’s still alive, but—” She cut herself off again. Whatever that *but* was going to be she substituted it with, “He’s strong.”

“You need to tell me everything,” Jenn said.

Maria exhaled hard. “I know. It’s just ... he lost so much blood,” she said. “One of his teammates ended up doing a battlefield transfusion, and nearly died himself, because of it. Jenni, it’s a miracle that Dan’s still alive at all. If he didn’t have the friends that he has ... This would already be a very different phone call. As it is ...”

Dear God. “Was it an IED?” Jenn asked, because it was clear Maria had gotten at least some details.

“Indirectly,” Maria said, and her word only made sense when she added, “Dan was assisting with the civilian casualties after some kind of car bomb went off, and a sniper started shooting. He was hit.”

“So he’s been shot,” Jenn said, meeting Jack’s steady gaze, “someplace where he lost a lot of blood. In his chest or—”

“It was his leg,” Maria told her.

“His leg,” Jenn told Jack, unable to keep herself from glancing down at his empty pant leg. Oh God.

“If something goes wrong with the surgery,” Maria said, “or if he’s too weak to be operated on ... He could lose his leg. And that’s one of the better-case scenarios. I really think you should wait before you go anywhere, Jenn.”

“I don’t want to wait,” Jenn said. “Tell Savannah yes, please buy me a ticket. Tell her

thank you.”

“Jenni,” Maria started.

“I want to be there,” Jenn said. “I need to be there when he wakes up, especially if ... Go most people don’t get that chance. I’m going to be there.”

“Jenn, he might not wake up.”

“But he’s strong,” Jenn reminded her. “He’s a fighter. Just tell Savannah. I can be at the airport in an hour.”

Danny *was* strong. He *was* a fighter.

But all young men and women who went to fight wars were strong. They were all fighters. And sometimes, despite that, they died anyway.

Jenn looked at Jack, who was still holding her hand.

And sometimes they lost their legs.

LAS VEGAS

DATE UNKNOWN

For too many years, there was no such thing as no in Neesha’s world.

Dissent was not allowed, not without punishment.

Years ago, when she was first brought to this awful place, punishment meant an empty belly and nothing but a hard, cold floor to sleep upon, a faucet for water, and a bucket for her waste, while locked in a tiny, empty cell. That was often all it took among the other new girls to turn a no into a yes.

But in those early days, Neesha preferred the hunger, the bucket, and the cold floor to the pain and humiliation that came when the men—the clients or visitors, they were called—held her down with the weight of their bodies and jabbed themselves between her legs.

It was wrong, and she would *not* do it ever again.

And she screamed and cried, which frightened the visitors, and kept them from touching her. It also made the tall man with the florid face who was her new lord and master angry, so he locked her again in that cell.

The hunger made her cry, but she still said no. And then a fellow worker, a girl who was older, saved part of her meals to share. She furtively passed the morsels through the tiny window in Neesha’s door. And so she put up with that hard, cold floor for nine whole days and nights of no, with only twinges of hunger instead of great, yawning pain.

But the tall man—Mr. Nelson—he must have found out about the food, because the kind girl vanished. Neesha hadn’t seen her again, not even once in all of the years since.

It was then that Mr. Nelson brought Neesha and her no into a beautiful room—more beautiful than she’d ever seen before in her entire short life—where a magnificent meal was set out on a huge table.

He’d left her there, and Neesha, still hungry, had eaten her fill, filled, too, with hope that her grandfather, a man her mother had spoken of with such affection and respect, had somehow managed to find and rescue her.

But when a man came in, while he was, indeed, old enough to be her grandfather, he had a face as pale and a head as bare of hair as the moon. His eyes were not like Neesha’s or her mother’s. They were blue and flatly ugly, as if his soul had already left his body.

And although she hadn't yet learned to speak any American, she knew what he wanted from his gestures.

When she gave him her emphatic no, he smiled. And he didn't just take what he wanted anyway, like the other men before him, hands trembling and even weeping while they kissed her, before she'd learned that her piercing screams would scare them away when simply sobbing wouldn't.

Instead, he took while he beat her, and he laughed with delight even as she screamed. And then he took some more in ways that were meant to hurt her, until she lay naked and bleeding, too stunned to cry, on that beautiful floor.

The man washed himself after, whistling as he did so, and then he left.

Women came in then, but they weren't warm like her mother had been, back before she'd fallen ill and died. They cleaned Neesha and bandaged her as best they could, but they did so without any comfort or kind words. In fact, they spoke to her sternly. *You reap what you sow*.

And then they brought her back to her cell, where she wept until she fell asleep.

The door didn't open for three very hungry, very sore days as she lay on the floor, curled up in a ball. And when it finally did open, it was once again Mr. Nelson who stood there looking down at her as she trembled and wept with fear.

And he took her, carrying her because her legs wouldn't hold her. He brought her back, not to the beautiful room, thank God, but to a separate bathing room, where the cold, angry women again washed her clean.

They braided her hair in a way that made her look even younger than she truly was, and they gave her a new dress and delivered her back to Mr. Nelson, who led her to the small room where she'd first lived and served the visitors, before she'd dared to say no.

A man was in there, waiting. His hungry eyes filled with tears as he saw her, because he, too, knew that what he wanted to do was wrong because she was just a child.

There was food laid out in there, too. It was nowhere near as sumptuous as the feast she'd had three days before. But it was hot and it smelled good and it would fill her belly and give her strength. The bed in the corner was soft and warm. Neesha knew that, as well.

And although she didn't speak Mr. Nelson's language and he didn't speak hers, he made it clear that it was her choice. She could go in.

Or she could say no, and go back to the room where the men wouldn't kiss her and lick her with their tremulous mouths, touch her almost reverently with their trembling hands, but instead would hit her and bite her and laugh while she screamed.

Neesha went inside.

And she never again said no.

Not until years later.

Until the day it happened.

Until the day that Andy, the fat daytime guard, had clutched his chest and fallen, gasping and wheezing, to the ground, leaving her door unlocked and open as he shuddered and shook.

Neesha stepped through the door and around him and quickly slipped from the wing of the building where the children were locked in their rooms. And because she'd just had a visitor who'd wanted only to watch and touch himself while she bathed and then put on the clothes and makeup of a much older woman, she was able to fade back and then pass, unnoticed, through the women's wing, where the guards were there only to keep visitors from going

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