

Informed Consent
Giving Way Book Two

By

Saoirse Roghan

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Saoirse Roghan

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Reluctant Consent, Giving Way Book One

Give Way: verb

Move-- in order to make room for something, ease up, yield.

Break Down, literally or metaphorically.

End resistance.

Informed Consent:

Informed consent implies a clear appreciation and understanding of all relevant facts, the implications of these facts, and the future consequences of an action. In order to give informed consent, the individual must possess adequate reasoning abilities and be in possession of all relevant facts at the moment consent is given.

Chapter 1

Andrew Cross, hands on his hips, shot his wife an assessing glance. His pretty wife frowned at her foot with an intensity that seemed unwarranted; she was painting her toenails bright purple. Andrew didn't think this act warranted the concentrated look of intent she brought to the job but he was a man, and what did they know?

Somewhere in the city women were dressing in power suits, gathering ipads and briefcases and headed for courts, for executive offices, for cavernous classroom amphitheatres. Somewhere women were thinking about surgeries they would perform later while putting the finishing touches on the breakfast they prepared for their husbands, packed lunches for the kids and lined them up on the counter near the door while a bevy of freshly scrubbed and neatly dressed children ate a nutritious breakfast that did not involve breakfast pastries.

Definitely slipped into fantasyland there, bud.

"What are you up to today, Dinx?" He didn't mean to speak sharply; the look on Denise's face when she looked up told him he had. There were days where he felt all he did was criticize and God knows that wouldn't help things between them.

He needed to ramp it down.

She looked at him, her face blank, eyes wide, mouth opened slightly. She moved her head to the side, tilted just an inch, causing her wildly curling hair to flow further down her torso, glancing off her breasts and reflecting morning sunshine.

"Nothing." The tip of her pink tongue flicked her lower lip and she straightened. "Ah—I'm not sure—"

Andrew's blood flow probably tripled its rate. Two conflicting urges swamped him. Yank her to her feet, tip her over his knee and levy sharp smacks on her upturned ass until she had a much clearer idea of what her day would look like. Or, alternatively, jerk her into his arms, strip her boxers off and— .Andrew bit down hard on both.

Moving closer, he clamped a firm grip on his voice. It wasn't as easy to be the Head of the House as a person might think. It was supposed to mean he was in charge and was obeyed and respected. It seemed to mean he had to think for everybody and he was constantly battling with his wife. His brother Neil and his father— both of whom had guided and controlled intelligent, resourceful, independent minded women successfully for years— would say he was doing something very wrong. There shouldn't be that many conflicts. At that moment, he suspected they were right. And at the same time, he had no idea what to do differently.

Denise went back to examining her small toe, the coppery curls now cascading down towards her foot.

Andrew pulled a lungful of air in through his nose, letting it out before he spoke. "Look at me please."

She did.

A slight flush stained her cheekbones.

"There were a few things we talked about you accomplishing this week." Like getting the gate fixed. Like talking to the three contractors he'd recommended about repairing the wreck

of a house. Like finding a direction in her life...

He didn't say: And it's freaking Thursday. He kept his eyes on her face so he saw the tiny little rebellious twitch in her jaw.

"I hope you do get them done, Denise. I'd like to avoid using corrective measures." Saying 'spank' would have inflamed his wife. Saying 'Corrective measures' made him sound like a giant ass. All he wanted to do was not provoke the woman.

The tiny rebellion swelled. "You don't have to, Andrew. You choose to."

Being the bigger man, Andrew ignored the tone and the words, although he did lift a brow and shoot her the look

"Excuse me," she muttered, laying another fine layer of purple to an area that seemed impossibly small. She could be a surgeon— not going to happen.

He squatted down.

She continued to focus on her toe; she was Michelangelo, her toe the Sistine chapel. Now she was toying with him.

"Look at me Babe."

Even with her petulance, he wanted to push her down on the floor and make her scream with pleasure. And orgasm six or nine times.

"Your stuff has to be settled in this room when I get home tonight."

He caught her chin with one finger and kissed her lips— first sweet and soft and then pillaged her mouth, his palm sliding around to the back of her head and holding her firmly where he wanted her.

A groan escaped— coming from deep in her throat. He grinned behind the kiss. He kissed and nipped at her lips, her ear lobe, her throat while his other hand wandered and found her breast. "Get it done, Babe."

It wasn't every man who was lucky enough to successfully use sex to motivate his wife.

Denise had three younger brothers. Zander, at eight the youngest, sat in Spelling and wished his mother was alive. She wasn't. Both his mom and dad had died leaving him to the care of his only sister, Denise. He didn't understand the whole deal; for reasons beyond his years, Denise had to marry Andrew. If she didn't Zander and his brothers would have to live with Aunt Lucille. Neither Zander nor his brothers wanted that; Lucille turned children into robots. William might have survived but Lucas and him? No way.

Zander liked Andrew, so no big deal. He wasn't stupid though. Sometimes the air between his sister and her husband crackled like he'd stuck a fork in the microwave.

His mother had been a flake, Lucas said. William wasn't so polite. He called her a bipolar freak, which Zander didn't understand. He didn't necessarily grasp everything there was to know about the poles, North and South, but he didn't see how any woman could be on both at the same time. Not to mention his mother had been in the house when William called her that.

Despite her flakiness, his mother had liked him. Maybe she hadn't liked William and Lucas anymore, but she had still liked him. He was still little. His sister Denise said, "Mom likes babies and toddlers. Don't have your own life if you want to stay on her good side."

William and Lucas, at fifteen and twelve, did have their own lives. William played lacrosse and sold pot. He was an important guy in their school and the neighborhood. Lucas

was always on his skateboard doing death-defying leaps into the air with his pals. Or killing zombies. Or playing guitar. Or collecting stray dogs. He definitely had a life.

Zander decided not to cultivate a life. Put simply, he wanted his mother to keep liking him. According to Denise, who seemed like the most reasonable person in the family, Mom was a Narcissus and that meant the world needed to revolve around her; in other words, the other person couldn't have a life.

"Not a flower, love." Denise had kissed his head after saying that. "It means she's the sun and you have to be her little moon."

So Zander had been a moon and his mother remained very fond of him. She hugged him and liked to run her fingers through his hair. She liked him to look at her pictures, or weaving, or felting or whatever she was working on, and tell her it was the best thing ever.

"Zander!"

The entire class had turned and was looking at him. Dubonnet Hawthorne stuck his tongue out too and crossed his eyes while safely waving The Finger at chest level where the teacher wouldn't be able to see it.

"Were you day dreaming again, Zander?"

Zander shook his head.

"Then you don't need me to repeat the question."

Zander liked Ms. Franten the first few days of school at the beginning of the year. He didn't like her anymore. Here was a perfect example of why. Why ask a question if you knew the answer. That was dumb. And a trick.

But his mother had not raised a stupid moon. He was in spelling. Lucas always said to go ahead and take a whack at anything.

"A- N- Y- T- H- I- N- G"

Dubonnet was laughing his ass off now.

Mrs. Franten inhaled a great deal of air.

"That's lovely, Zander. Unfortunately we spelled that word some time ago."

"I didn't," Zander muttered.

All of the air Mrs. Frankenstein had sucked in came whooshing out. She shook her head and walked down the row towards him shaking her Barbie head.

"Zander we all know you miss your mother—"

She had more to say, but Zander didn't wait to hear what it might be. He felt tears pop up in his eyes and even in the second grade that was the kiss of death. So he said something rude – like eat my shorts, and bolted for the door.

Being in the hall solved one problem, but caused others. He ducked into the bathroom and poised near a toilet, ready to hop up if needed.

"Alexander Thomas Marrow."

The door opened. Zander moved ninja-like to stand on the toilet seat.

"Are you in this bathroom, young man?"

A swoop of bright yellow hair cascaded to the floor. Mrs. Frankfurter was checking for feet.

Smarter than her Barbie looks let on, his teacher now shoved doors open. Zander didn't wait. In one amazing move he swung the stall door open and leaped through to the floor. He shoved Ms. Fancy Pants into the stall she was currently investigating and took off running.

She screamed.

Zander ran faster.

His goose was cooked. No point in staying around.

Denise picked up a stack of clothes from the bed. Her failure to finish moving her belongings to “their” room had pissed Andrew off. A pissed off Andrew wasn’t a good idea.

Since she hadn’t exactly *wanted* to marry Andrew— she hadn’t volunteered for what was definitely hazardous duty— when they married, Denise assigned Andrew the spacious suite of rooms filling the west corner of the second floor. She’d given him the suite hoping he’d feel like he had his own space, and she would have hers. Maybe not what every newly married couple arranged, but wasn’t this case— her and Andrew— a little different?

The suite included a generous private bath, extensive closets, a tiny kitchen and a large sitting room. Back in the first few weeks of the marriage, it seemed to have worked. Then the man had some sort of freakish epiphany and insisted on her presence— in his bed and in his room.

Of course there were moments— sometimes whole days— when she was happy to be in ‘his’ room. When she worked with him, they made a good team. But there were other times, times when she felt like she’d lost track of something important; that Andrew helped her. That once she’d been wild about him. Loved him.

She’d hoped having his own space would give him a sense of privacy, which also meant she wouldn’t have to be with him when she was freaking out. Because inevitably, freak out she did.

She’d first laid eyes on Andrew when she’d turned to say something to a friend. In line for overpriced coffee, they were nervous, and excited, and doing their best Stupid Vapid Girl Imitations to cover it. They’d been shanghai’d into a stint as unpaid tutors for an informal ESL— English as a second language— project for one of her professors. And that was a big stretch for a pack of girls who were all essentially, she admitted to herself now, children of privilege, who were very busy failing at higher education.

All had been raised by ‘help’. And in the US of A, ‘help’ usually meant a primarily Spanish speaking Hispanic worker who may or may not have had a green card. And when the bulk of the warmth and consistent nurturing you received came from these folks, you usually ended up, like Denise, speaking fluent, if informal, Spanish.

Standing in that line, catching sight of Andrew’s shock of brown hair, intrigued by the clothes that were both hip and yet totally his own style— she’d no idea she’d skipped a few rungs on the growing— up ladder. All she knew was she had an opportunity to get extra credit and make up for missing too many classes, rushing too many assignments, flunking too many exams. Just because they could all chatter in Spanish didn’t mean they could spell it. So much for Spanish as an easy A, right?

Not flunking was on her mind that night, and after that glimpse she also wondered how on earth she’d managed to overlook that beautiful, big, male up until that moment.

The fact she now realized she wasn’t so privileged after all wasn’t a complaint too many people would have sympathy for. There were the moments when she felt trapped. Yell at the man: get a spanking. Go off by yourself: You’re distancing (and get a spanking). Tell him what’s on your mind: get worked up. Lose your temper, really piss him off (and get a spanking). See? Trapped!

And since she did periodically freak out, she had kept her own room. Now, at Andrew’s request, they slept together nightly. But she’d left her stuff in the room she’d grown up in. It was

her refuge. She needed her own room. A place to go when she needed to take a breath, think, get a grip on her temper.

Denise moved towards the doorway. Everything felt heavy. Not the clothes. Her insides.

“You want this stuff?” Her best friend called to her.

She caught sight of Robert’s face; he was waiting for her answer.

“No. Leave the box. I’ll take it to the attic later. Grab clothes, will you?”

Denise marched down the hall. At the central hall, she forked right and headed up a short flight of stairs to the suite. A phone rang somewhere and she ignored it. Anyone who really wanted her would call her cell. She pushed open the door to the bedroom and thought for a minute. It might be very tempting to toss the armload where it would bug HIM the most but it wasn’t the wisest choice. Any impulse to annoy Andrew she should squash, she pissed him off plenty without doing it with malice and aforethought.

There! Progress! She’d had a stupid, immature, non-productive impulse and had squashed it. By herself. Golly gee. She’d acted like an adult!

Robert followed her. He dumped his armful on a couch in the sitting area before turning in a slow circle, his gaze sweeping the room. He stopped, and stood with his hands on his hips. “This is a great space. You guys kind of have your own world to retreat to.”

Denise didn’t answer. She threw her armful of clothes into the closet, not concerned in the least when they landed on the floor. Robert stuck his head into the huge closet and manhandled his way past her. He shook his head and jabbed her with his elbow.

“Jesus. Way to be a pig. Andrew will kick you out of his room.” He waved a cautionary finger. “Piggy ain’t sexy.”

Denise rolled her eyes.

Robert plucked a pair of shoes from the heap and gave them a long assessing glance. “Nice. I like the kitten heels. Okay. Let’s move some of this stuff– ” He stretched up to the top shelf– “and make this shelf for shoes. His over here and yours– ”

“Fine.”

Robert, hands still holding a pair of killer shoes, continued to scan the closet with a pained look.

“Oh for Pete’s sake!” Denise bent and scooped up a pile of shoes. “Take ‘em!”

“Hold your horses, girl. I’m arranging in pairs. You don’t have to be a slob.”

Denise sighed.

“Remember, Piggy isn’t– ”

“Sexy,” Denise snapped the word out. “Got it.”

“Let’s take a calming breath.” Robert mimicked another one of their friends and made weird snorting noises, pulling air in through his nose.

“Take them!” Denise thrust the armload at him. “We’ll play Martha Stewart later, ok?” She was close to genuine hysteria. Her ass was literally on the line. “I have to get all this crap moved.”

In the main hall the house phone rang again, barely audible. She should turn the ringer down. Or get rid of it. Who used a landline anymore?

Robert heaved the heavy sigh of the long-suffering and rolled his eyes.

Easy for him. He had no idea what life in her shoes was like. She missed the comfort of confiding in him; she hated hiding things from her best friend. So far though, she’d been unable to tell her best friend her husband believed in domestic discipline. Worst of all? Sometimes it made sense to her, too. Maybe. Just sometimes

Because who had even heard of such a thing? Not her— before Andrew anyhow. She was tearing up again. “Fuck.”

She leaned against the doorjamb and started to cry in earnest — the steady hiccup— y kind that made her nose run. Robert goggled at her, eyes wide with horror.

“Crap. Are you crying, girl? I’ve never in my life seen you sob except, you know, when you wanted to wrap some innocent person around your finger. And that wasn’t real. Crap! Stop that.”

“Yeah. Pathetic, right?”

Robert circled her with his arms and shushed into her hair.

“I’m guessing not tears of happiness, huh?”

Denise snorted and shoved at his chest in an effort to dislodge her friend. Tears— real, not manipulative ones— were embarrassing and here she was drowning the man’s chest hair. She broke loose and stalked away, using her fingers to dash away tears. “I’m not discussing this. Are you going to help, or not?”

She headed back down the hall. Back in her old room, she shuffled papers and files and scooped an armload of stuff into a box. Since she’d taken on the responsibility of her brothers she’d managed to collect a lot of paperwork. She didn’t have much idea what any of it was, but she had it. She dropped the load on the couch. Robert came out of the bathroom with a cloth. “Sit!”

Denise glared at him. But she did throw herself into a chair and tuck her feet underneath her. Robert scooted her hair off her face with great gentleness and placed the cloth on her face. Cool and damp, it did feel really good. She let her head fall to the back of the chair. His hand stroked her hair and unfortunately that felt really good too.

The kindness undid her. More sobs erupted from her hidden pit of misery.

Robert squatted next to her chair, elbows on his knees, hands dangling.

“What the heck, Dinx?”

Denise glared at him through her tears. Andrew had started calling her that, much to her annoyance

Robert collapsed, laughing, next to her on the floor. “Spill it, Babe. What the hell is going on?”

Denise tossed the damp cloth at him. Now it felt cloying and creepy, not soothing.

“I thought things were great. Why else did you two get back together and get married, for Pete’s sake?”

It was horrible not to tell your best friend how confusing your life was. And it was horrible to have to tell your friend you were a bizarre freak of nature.

At the moment *lonely* felt worse than idiotic. Denise spilled her guts.

When she finished, Robert’s eyes were twinkling. Not the reaction she’d expected.

“He *spanks* you?”

Denise dropped her head, nodded. She refused to look him in the eye.

“And it— it turns you on?”

“Thanks so much for spelling that out. It sounds even worse to hear you say it out loud. It was bad enough in my head.” She hung her head. A tear dripped to her shoe. “I hate it, Robert. I do! But I end up sopping wet!”

“We’re not talking kinky— sexy fun spanking?” Robert pushed himself up and stood gazing down at Denise. She looked up at him with suspicion. It looked like the man was trying really hard not to laugh.

Denise shook her head.

“You know Andrew’s always been sort of straight and narrow. Me? I’m a mess! But when did spanking your wife fit in with the straight and narrow?”

“Sweet heart, plenty of people never stopped spanking their wives.”

Her head came up. “Really?”

“Yes. For one reason or the other. Some because that’s their kink. And some for well-discipline. Sounds like Andrew. Who knew? Do you think his family is that way? I know his mother.” His eyes narrowed. And then he let go of a hoot of laughter.

“Does it hurt?”

“Oh my God!” Denise glared at him. She bolted from the chair, and stormed into the bathroom, jerking at her jeans and panties. “Look at this and ask me again if it hurts, you big idiot.”

Andrew stopped dead at the threshold to his – and now apparently their – rooms later that evening. His eyes traveled the space immediately surrounding him and he inhaled an extra-large amount of oxygen. Hurricane Denise had swept through the suite. He set his own bag down on the floor near the old desk that ran along one wall. Earlier in the day, before he’d left for work, the vast expanse had looked inviting – a cup full of writing utensils, a laptop. Some legal pads. He shook his head. Piles of paper and tangles of power cords littered the surface.

Focus on the positive. She’d moved her stuff. This was good.

But she’d left her shit everywhere, in utter chaos, which was bad. When he talked to his brother– who was happily married to an incredible woman– about establishing domestic discipline everything seemed cut and dried. Reality wasn’t. This DD stuff was like understanding physics while the prof lectured, then getting home and realizing you didn’t have a fucking clue. Knowing what to focus on was damn tricky. Was he supposed to paste a gold star on her forehead for making the move, or heat her ass for being a slob?

He’d grown up in a large family where everyone knew Dad was the Ultimate Authority. Which had not meant mom was some kind of weak doormat. With four boys careening through the house, his mother had ruled with an iron hand. He’d seen his parents as a team. His mom always spoke her mind and as often as not his father followed her suggestion. If he’d thought about it he supposed he would have realized there had to have been struggles somewhere down the line– maybe at the beginning of their marriage.

Andrew and his brothers hadn’t been privy to that information. And, he thought wryly, why would they have been? Kids absorb parental values from the air in the household. He hoped he did as good a job keeping his and Denise’s business private from her brothers. And passing on their values.

His eyes wandered around the room again. Not that he could picture his mother leaving a disaster around her like Denise had.

He shoved the bathroom door open and let out a whistle. There were a few small baskets of stuff set on the counter but nothing like the disaster he’d feared. He automatically reached for a drawer but stopped abruptly.

Why open the drawer? His wife had followed directions and moved her stuff. Let it go. Keep the drawer shut.

The bedroom was ok. The only obvious addition he spotted was a sweatshirt crumpled up on one side of the bed. She'd confined her dump to the living area of the suite of rooms. Where was she anyway?

Other surprises showed up downstairs as he headed through the rest of the house. One improvement: the refrigerator was stocked. Impressed, he stuck his head into several cupboards and the pantry. There was food everywhere. Boxes of crackers, pasta. Cans of soup. Boxes of pop-tarts. Cereal. Fresh fruit in a bowl. Potatoes and onions in a basket. He lifted the head off a massive green frog and found cookies. He opened the door to the freezer and whistled again. Meat. Frozen food. Bread. Had she done this? Or had she sent the housekeeper? Did it matter?

No. This morning food had been nonexistent, now it wasn't. She'd solved the problem and that was all that mattered. Goddamn. Maybe this shit would work out after all. On the counter the telephone answering light flashed. Frowning, Andrew pushed the button. Answering the phone and listening to messages was another area Denise could stand some improvement. One baby step, he reminded himself, at a time.

A huge racket announced the boys' arrival, drowning out the voice on the machine. Apparently, he'd beat them home. At least some of them. Lucas was doing his best to ride a skateboard into the house. Zander, in his own world, sang without respect for key. Tom the driver—hired recently because his wife had lost her driving privileges by police decree—looked worried. Probably because he was missing William. Not his fault, but the young man obviously took things seriously. Maybe this shit wouldn't work out.

At least not today.

Andrew took a book bag twice the size of the kid from Zander's arms and bent over to scoop the skateboard out from under Lucas. Tom opened his mouth but changed his mind, instead looking down at the ground and scuffed it with a toe. Andrew bit back the urge to snap at him. *Real Men don't scuff the freaking ground.*

"I'm missing one, Mr. Cross."

"I see that, Tom. Hold on, you two!"

Zander and Lucas froze.

Andrew turned back to the driver. "William's a no show?"

Tom nodded and followed it with a shrug. "He didn't say anything this morning. I reminded them of time and stuff." His voice sounded apologetic. The kid didn't need to feel apologetic. William did.

"No problem, Tom. Not your job to make the kid show up. Thanks! We'll see you tomorrow, eh?"

Andrew watched the man close the door to the garage with obvious care and turned back to the two brothers who had made it home. "You guys have any word on William?"

Zander shook his head. Lucas shrugged, his eyes narrowing.

Andrew shot a hand out and grabbed Lucas by the arm. "You usually see William during the day?"

Another shrug.

"Yes or no, Lucas. I'm not asking you to narc on your brother. I'm asking when you saw him last."

"This morning. When we got out of the van." Lucas flushed, voice sullen.

"Do you usually see him after that point?"

"Sometimes. In the halls. Maybe at lunch."

"Is his lunch period the same as yours?" This was pulling nails. Or teeth. But Andrew

understood. No one wanted to narc.

Lucas nodded, scowling. “Now, can I go?”

Denise came through the door to the kitchen, a startled look on her face. He lived here. Schedules could change. His had. Was he supposed to call it in? If he hadn't been here, no one would know William was missing. One more damn problem they'd need to talk about. The whole evening was rapidly deteriorating into a déjà vu moment and he suspected it was somehow his fault.

“William's a no show,” he said to Denise. “Did he reach you?”

He cuffed Lucas gently. “You can scram, kid.”

Andrew moved to the fridge and leaned in, grabbing a water. “Anything for you, Denise?”

She shook her head, reaching into her pocket for her cell. “I didn't hear from William.” She opened the message app, shook her head again. “Nothing. I thought maybe I'd missed it.” She stabbed William's speed dial.

Andrew pulled a chair out and pointed. “Sit with me. I suspect he didn't go today either.” He walked back to the counter and pushed the button for messages a second time.

“Wouldn't the school call?” Denise, apparently oblivious to the recorded voice he was trying to listen to. She added: “And Christ! Don't bark commands at me!”

Andrew grinned, yanking out a chair for himself. No one could accuse him of breaking her spirit. “I didn't bark. Don't say Christ. Did you catch that message?”

“I can't say 'Christ'? Why not?”

“It's swearing. Who knows if the school would know a kid was missing? They must have, though— that was the school.” He cocked his head in the direction of the machine. “As a guardian you hope the school notices, but God only knows what William could have pulled off.”

He grinned to himself. His wife didn't know what even one of her three young brothers was up to but she expected a large, private school should? And then he realized what was wrong. The message had been from the elementary school. If the call had referred to William it would have been the high school.

“I'm not changing my speech, Andrew.”

“Pardon?” He looked at her. She was firing explosives from her eyes and her face was flushing. Andrew lifted a brow, but chose to ignore the tone and the flaunted challenge. She reddened further. Nodding his head at her cell he added: “He's not picking up?”

Denise frowned for a moment and then gave a quick shake of her head.

“One thing at a time, Dinx. William— I don't suppose there's much to worry about at this point, do you? I mean, is this unusual, for this house? But *that* message was the elementary school.”

Denise frowned. “It was?” She shrugged. “I'll go on line. There's one of those school sites — where you can look up homework and stuff— see what they say about William.”

Jesus— schools had changed. Now there were web sites? He heard his thoughts, and gave a quick shake of his head. Was he turning into a complete moron? Did he object to swearing? Or was he just jumping on her shit for the hell of it?

The web site, once they logged in, revealed that William had been excused— allegedly— from school. Andrew sighed. “We'll deal with it, Babe. But check on the little guy, too, would you? See if there's a message about Zander.” He picked up the mail on the counter and flipped through it, adding: “Let's not get our panties in a knot yet, ok? It'll take some time for all of us to adjust.”

“Except you.”

His head snapped up from the mail and he focused back on her. “Come again?”

“We have to adjust. The boys have to adjust to having rules and structure. I have to adjust to having a dictator all over my shi—” Denise caught herself, almost in time. “— stuff.” She finished, blushing. “You don’t have to adjust to anything. Except the incredible annoyance of having sex available whenever you want.”

Andrew kept his face neutral but his temper surged. He counted to ten. He reviewed mentally the capitals of the Eastern Seaboard States. Nothing worked. He moved towards her.

“You never stop pushing, do you lady?”

Denise’s face tightened, paled, flight written across it. She stood her ground.

“Do you think I want to come home at night and try to find something to make dinner out of for five people? Do you think I like having to sort out the chaos this family swims in daily? That I want to fight with a woman every time I turn around? I’d like to have a great dinner out with a pretty woman who is happy to see me. And go home and make love, not paddle the ass of a woman too stubborn to behave like a mature adult.”

He expected an argument at best. But Denise was startled.

“I didn’t think about that. Not the ‘happy to see you’ – that’s not my fault. No one’s forcing you to paddle anyone either, mister! But, I didn’t think about the responsibility you’ve picked up. And you have. And I know its huge, Andrew. Sometimes I want to run away. Maybe even most of the time. But I absolutely know I’d be totally screwed without your help. I *am* trying to figure parenthood out. “

“I know you are.” He put his hand up to her cheek. “You’re coming from way behind and trying to get in front of them, Denise. I’m trying to help.”

He cupped his hand around the back of her neck and tugged. “I know you don’t like the way I help, Babe. I do hope you know I think it’s what’s best for all of us.”

He pressed his lips to her forehead.

Denise nodded, let her body sink into his and let her arms wrap around him.